

Centenary from a Specific Angle: Reflections on Modern Irish Literature and the Irish Spirit in the Hungarian Literary Journal *Nyugat* (1908-1941)

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Early in the twentieth century Hungarian interest in English literature was part of a more general aspiration of intellectuals to absorb and draw inspiration from the culture of Western Europe, especially from English and continental Modernism. In January 1908 critics and editors Miksa Fenyő, Ernő Osvát, and Hugó Ignotus launched the semi-monthly literary periodical *Nyugat*, the centenary of which we now celebrate. The journal became a leading forum of literary Modernism in pre- and interwar Hungary, its name, “The West,” signalling the commitment of its editors and authors to join the aesthetic and intellectual ferment of Western Europe. The editors intended to overcome the belatedness and peripheral position of Hungarian literary culture in respect to European modernity. From the outset, the majority of the authors publishing in the journal were inspired by such turn-of-the-century European literary trends and movements like symbolism, aestheticism, and impressionism. Among the Hungarian literary journals of the time *Nyugat* represented the liberal, cosmopolitan orientation along with a restrained, balanced nationalism.

The normative, canonizing influence of the periodical was highest in the years before and during the First World War when the editors’ high critical standards, together with a progressive political and social agenda, allowed the prestigious periodical to represent a wide variety of the period’s literary and critical aspirations. However, the turmoil during and after the war brought radical changes in Hungarian politics, society, and culture. The bourgeois revolution of October 1918 was followed by a communist coup, and by the installation of the short-lived Communist and Social Democratic coalition government in 1919, which collapsed later in the same year. After the Trianon peace accord Hungary lost two-thirds of its former territory, and the monarchy was nominally restored with the regency of Miklós Horthy. The ensuing conservative rule meant a serious setback for social reforms and also a narrowing of the cultural spectrum in interwar Hungary. In this period *Nyugat* retained its role as the promoter of high Modernist principles in both writing and critical thought. However, from the early 1920s until its cessation in 1941 the periodical upheld its high standards of literary quality but lost its central place as a cultural platform. Its orientation was now characterized by a certain elitism paired with an apolitical stance, due to the increasing political and cultural isolation of the liberal intelligentsia in Horthy’s conservative régime.

The editors of *Nyugat* were guardians of a certain standard of quality, not of uniformity of opinion. Critical reflections on foreign literature were alternatively promotional and polemical. By reflecting on the work of their foreign contemporaries

writers could articulate their critical views, define their commitments and creative methods in the wider context of contemporary European literature. No other literary journal published so extensively about, and so many translations from literature in English as *Nyugat*, the dissemination of leading West European writers' work pertaining to its western orientation. Owing to the editors' efforts Hungary, for the first time in its intellectual history, came close to overcoming its cultural belatedness. The journal's contributors observed the English literary scene closely and noticed the prominence of major Irish writers like Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, or George Bernard Shaw. Reflections on their work published in *Nyugat* were instrumental in raising public awareness that these authors, even though they wrote in English, shared a cultural tradition and sensibility that made their work distinctive.

My essay proceeds to give an outline of the Irish literary canon as promoted by three generations of Hungarian writers and literary critics associated with *Nyugat* during the first two decades of the twentieth century and between the wars. It will also give a general outline of the Irish literary canon in Hungary during this period, paying special attention to the critical evaluation of Irish writers according to the standards set by the editors and contributors of this high quality, albeit low circulation, literary journal. There were, in this period, tendencies among Hungarian writers and critics to explain the divergence of Irish culture and literary expression from the English by attributing a distinct "national" or "racial" character to Irish culture. Such views were, on the one hand, late flourishes of Herderian national characterology and, on the other hand, theories developed under the influence of Oswald Spengler's philosophy of history which was in vogue among the Hungarian Modernist authors of the interwar period. Beginning with the mid-1930s, however, the term "racial character" underwent considerable change due to the rising influence in Eastern Europe of the cultural politics of fascist Germany, which prompted the leading authors and literary critics to eliminate the term "race" from their vocabulary. With this, notions about the distinctness of Irish culture from the English one lost momentum and remained in oblivion until as late as the 1970s, resulting in a considerable impoverishment in the reception of, for instance, Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Role Models and Literary Mentors: Hungarian Interest in Irish Modernism

The editorial policies of *Nyugat* were in consonance with the cultural modernization that began in Hungary at the turn of the century. The process of urbanization in the decades after the Compromise of 1867 had brought radical changes in the culture of cities nationwide, especially in Budapest which emerged as a regional metropolis within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. However, as a result of political dependence and the arrested development of capitalism in Hungary this change also meant economic and social uncertainty which was reflected in the culture of the time. In a retrospective essay published in *Nyugat* in 1937, entitled "Arisztokratizmus

és szecesszió” [Aristocratism and Art Nouveau], Gábor Tolnai gives an accurate description about the general atmosphere of indefiniteness and lack of orientation, and evokes the new generation’s restless search for new social attitudes and forms of self-expression: “[t]hey are rough and superficial, like their end-of-the-century predecessors. But their superficiality takes inspiration from European models, which alone distinguishes them from the dandy of the 1890s. Instead of their fathers’ worn-out compliments they learn wit from the books of Oscar Wilde” (333). The literary culture of the fin-de-siècle meant a gradual distancing from the culture of the landed gentry which before had served as the social basis for intellectual life in Hungary. The urbanized members of this same class and the emerging bourgeois intelligentsia had difficulties in adapting to the new social and economic circumstances, and compensated for the lack with mannerisms adopted from English and French models. As a critic noted in 1908, Oscar Wilde’s antics and paradoxes, along with the eccentricities of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gauthier, or Barbey d’Aurévilly, gained almost cultic status (Szász, “Tűnj fel!” 501).

In the years before the war Wilde surpassed in popularity any other European author mainly on account of his aesthetic views, but his witticisms, provocative behaviour, his trial and imprisonment had profound and divisive effects on both the artists and the cultivated reading public. Wilde’s name became a by-word in literary journalism, appearing regularly enough on the pages of *Nyugat* to suggest he was considered common cultural property. Readers could be relied on to understand the epithet “Wilde-like,” or to envisage his “dazzle and fresh lyricism” and “haughty hedonism” (Hatvani 210; Kaffka 291; Karinthy, “Shaw Bernát Caesarja” 393-94). One essayist, Zoltán Szász repeatedly expressed in the journal disdain for Wilde’s “bizarre way of life and shocking apparel” (“Tűnj fel!” 502), his “morbid desire to attract attention, sensation- and curiosity-hunting taken to extremes” (“Wilde Oszkár” 652), and grumbled about “the epidemic fashion of the Wilde cult” (“A ‘mozi’ felé” 333). Such righteous hostility, however, failed to account for why the Irish writer had such a grip on the imagination of authors and readers alike, all of them participants in a paradigm shift that prompted an entire generation of intellectuals in turn-of-the-century Hungary to define themselves as urban, metropolitan, and modern. The extensive admiration of, and familiarity with Wilde was part of the process of rebellion against the conservative, nationalistic trends in literary criticism that saw the historical legacy of rural Hungary as the fountainhead of national culture. The new generation envisioned for themselves a social and cultural ambiance that was defined as being modern and compatible with west-European social and cultural models. The cult of beauty and artistic play, excess in expression, and an attitude of extreme individualism were those characteristics of fin-de-siècle aestheticism that were eagerly adopted by emergent young authors in Hungary.

The new trend and style also brought the rise of the “dandy” as the accompanying social and literary role model. Wilde was generally credited with refreshing and updating this pattern of behaviour. “The pedigree of [. . .] literary dandies goes far

back, and they have not died out. [. . .] Perhaps Oscar Wilde himself was oblivious of the social relevance of the type created by him,” Géza Laczkó claims in a review article about the French symbolist writer Barbey D’Aurévilly (387). In pre- and interwar Hungary the author most frequently associated with and compared to Wilde was Gyula Szini, essayist and prose writer, the first Hungarian translator of *Salome*,¹ and the embodiment of the “dandy” in the literary circles of Budapest. Evaluating Szini’s work after his death in 1932, Gábor Thurzó points out his likeness to the famous predecessor and literary model: “The reigning prince of the fin-de- siècle is Oscar Wilde, and Gyula Szini was such a belated dandy” (241). An enthusiastic advocate of new experiments in literature and criticism, Szini made his *début* in the 1890s in the journal *Magyar Géníusz* [Hungarian genius], one of the predecessors of *Nyugat*, with essays about French symbolism, impressionism and the principle of *l’art pour l’art* in literature. His own work, short stories and three novels, was consistent with these trends. Szini’s chiselled, lyrical prose was impressionistic, characterized by certain dreaminess, featuring isolated characters lost in fantasy worlds, secretly suffering or longing after imaginary realities that completely engulfed them. His essay “A mese alkonya” [The twilight of fable] published in the first issue of *Nyugat* in January 1908 laments the decline of literary realism into flat recordings of the trite, and calls for the return of our capacity for enchantment by pure art. To argue his point he cites Wilde as an authority on the ontological difference between the real world and the world of art, the latter being “the one which has to be talked about because it would not exist otherwise” (28). Like Wilde, Szini was the quintessential artist both in his work and his life which ended, like Wilde’s, in tragic oblivion and poverty. His last piece of writing published in *Nyugat* was a commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of Wilde’s death and a fond account of the three bunches of violets that mysteriously appeared on his tomb in the Père Lachaise Cemetery each year on this particular day (“Három ibolyacsokor” 60-61).

Wilde was also the most extensively translated Irish author in the first decades of the century. For the first generation of authors grouped around *Nyugat*, rendering his poetry in Hungarian was not only a technical *tour de force*, part of their formative experience as poets, but also an opportunity to put their own poetic experimentations into an international context. The literati who would later become his major translators, Mihály Babits and Dezső Kosztolányi were poets, prose writers and critics who started their career under the influence of aestheticism, and shared an enthusiasm for Wilde’s works. Babits translated several of his poems which were published in a separate volume, *Wilde Oszkár verseiből* [From the poetry of Oscar Wilde], in 1922. Kosztolányi rendered “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the plays *The Duchess of Padua* and *Salome*.² *Nyugat* often published poems in translation in more than one version,³ and poet-translators frequently discussed and evaluated each other’s achievements in order to point out the distinctive marks of their respective individual styles. Reviews about Hungarian versions of, for example, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” and “Charmides,” written by outstanding poets,

were ingenious pieces of interpretation by close reading.⁴ Repeated publications of poetry in translation sustained the readers' interest in international poetry and offered opportunities for exchange of views about the technical problems of translation.

Babits, the major poet, novelist and a leading authority in the literary life of the interwar period was editor of *Nyugat* from 1917 to 1941 and, as an enthusiastic promoter of English literature in Hungary, did the most in his generation to introduce English authors to Hungarian readers. His column of book reviews "Könyvről könyvre" [Book by book] regularly informed about new developments in European literature, placing special emphasis on English authors and works. Donne, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, Wilde, and Eliot were the major inspirations for his own poetry (Gál 21), and later in his career he also recognized and appreciated the relevance of Yeats.

Wilde had special importance for Babits, whose early poetic development included influences from the neo-romanticism of l'École parnassienne, through the psychology of William James, to late symbolism and impressionism (see Rába 82-83). The poems in his first two volumes, *Levelek Irisz koszorújából* [Leaves from Iris' wreath] and *Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is?* [But prince, what if winter comes?],⁵ published in 1909 and 1911, show thematic, stylistic, and technical similarities with Wilde's poetry.⁶ In addition to artistically wrought settings and decorative imagery, several poems give evidence of the fascination with the Hellenic world that Babits shared with Wilde. In his formative years Babits translated many of Wilde's poems, the first one being "Charmides" on which he worked at length during the winter of 1906-1907. The translation was published in *Nyugat* in 1911, and anthologized three times during the Hungarian poet's lifetime. Working on "Charmides" must have meant for the young Babits an initiation into the vertiginous use of poetic imagery that would characterize his poetry throughout his career. In the 1916 volume of translations *Wilde Oszkár verseiből* [from the poetry of Oscar Wilde] he added an explanatory note to this particular poem: "The translator very well perceives how much of his own imagination, his own poetry has infiltrated *Charmides*. [. . .] He dreamt the poems of Wilde into these particular forms, and he admits having diverged from the text just because he liked it better so" (qtd. in Gál 35). In a later anthology, *Oedipus király és egyéb műfordítások* [Oedipus Rex and other translations] Babits made another apologetic remark about the poem which he considered to be more of a rewriting than a translation:

Charmides in its Hungarian version is somehow of illegitimate birth; I call it, so to speak, translation because I dare not refer to it as an original piece. The young translator handled the English poem quite freely, the way he would not have dared to treat Sophocles or Shakespeare: like an irresponsible freebooter who plunders and alters to his own liking. Faithfulness has its degrees, and the degrees are value judgements. (*Kisebb műfordításai* 419, n363)

As his final, rather slant remark reveals, in his mature years Babits freed himself from Wilde's influence. Aestheticism had meant for him an introduction, a *début* into a way of writing the importance of which he later sought to diminish. Thus, translating Wilde meant for the Hungarian high Modernist poet an initiation into technical excellence that went only so far as the creative appropriation of certain themes and aspects of style. His further poetic development and mature literary expression has more affinities with the late poetry of Yeats, although he did not acknowledge any direct influence.

Although a Nobel Prize winner, Yeats as a poet and playwright was less popular in interwar Hungary than Wilde. Only one poem, "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead" was published in *Nyugat* in the translation of Mihály Babits (140). Nevertheless, Babits cited Yeats as a major English poet along with Thomas Hardy and John Masefield,⁷ and the Macmillan edition of *The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats* was favourably reviewed by him shortly after its publication in 1935. Babits was particularly impressed by Yeats's re-writings of his early works and, discerning the important paradigm shifts in the course of the Irish poet's career, remarked that his "typically nineteenth-century poems were reborn as twentieth-century innovative poetry" ("Teremtő utánzás" 462). Writers, he held, should address the problems of their time, but transcend the immediate particularities of their condition ("Új klasszicizmus felé" 20). Babits's conception of great literature made it possible that Yeats's poetry and drama, instead of being simply shelved with the Celtic Twilight movement or fin-de-siècle decadent poetry, could receive a more accurate evaluation, one that Babits readily provided in 1935:

When in the 1890s Yeats's dramas were becoming widely known on the continent they struck us like the strange amalgamation of modern decadence and ancient Celtic myth. [. . .] But for the poet decadence served as a means and prerequisite to make the poems more poetic and thus more exalted and heroic, to give the obsolete myths modern suggestiveness. The main pursuit of Yeats the dramatist is to reconstruct the character of antique drama. He applies the myths of the Irish as Greek tragedians apply those of Homer, and hides among his original plays translations from Sophocles. He is heroic, revolutionary and Irish even when he chooses a modern theme. [. . .] The form of Yeats's drama is poetry fused with poetic prose. ("Költő, forradalom és heroizmus" 260)

Himself a translator of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus in Colonus* as well as ancient Greek poetry, Babits valued the breadth of relevance Yeats gave to myth. He reinforced this acknowledgment in *Az európai irodalom története* [The history of European literature] published in 1934 and 1935, claiming that "[i]n his old days, Yeats unexpectedly renewed his skills and became modern" (*Az európai irodalom története* 474). And although a fuller scale of Yeats's evaluation had to wait until the

1970s (Bertha 156), the criticism of Babits gave the note to his reception in interwar Hungary.

Owing to the efforts of outstanding writers in the circle committed to the periodical *Nyugat*, especially those of Mihály Babits and Dezső Kosztolányi, Wilde's poetry and drama became accessible to Hungarian readers. Kosztolányi was also the first translator of John Millington Synge (Kurdi 221). Yeats's critical reception, especially by Mihály Babits, was favourable and accurate, however, he was not widely translated and his poetry failed to have an impact on Hungarian poetry of the interwar period. Outstanding Modernist poets regarded the poetry of Wilde as a source of inspiration as well as a challenge for their own technical skills. On the other hand, Hungarian authors' and critics' investment in the modernization of literary culture to match the high standards of West-European literary Modernism produced a critical discourse focussed on the technicalities of writing and formal experimentation in contemporary English and continental literature. Hungarian poet-translators' commentaries on foreign poetry were necessarily formalist, directed towards their own and their fellow-translators' achievements, and putting less emphasis on the historical and cultural contextualization of the work of Irish authors. As a result, major writers like Wilde and Yeats were discussed as belonging to the canon of English literature on the grounds that they wrote in English.

Artists as National Icons: The National Character of Irish Literature

A short sketch by Antal Szerb entitled “Századvég” [Fin-de-siècle], published in 1934, features four young literati doing the pub circuit in end-of-the-century London. Three of them, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson and John Davidson are real-life figures, members of the Rhymers' Club, but the last one, laconically referred to as Tyrconnel, is a thinly veiled disguise for Yeats. Szerb captured the atmosphere of the place and the time: rambling interests, refined taste and witty literary small talk, iconic artists like Wilde and George Russell making their brief appearance to crack aphorisms or drop Cabballistic cards. The characters' portrayal is parodic but appealing, each of them impersonating attitudes characteristic of early Modernism—infatuation with art, spleen, indefinite yearning—, as well as popular national stereotypes. Davidson is a snobbish symbolist and a calculating Scotsman, Johnson a highly cultivated, but ascetic English Catholic, and Dowson a reserved Englishman who keeps his artist's vocation secret and keeps up the appearance of being in the flax and hemp business. The character of Yeats/Tyrconnel is the roundest and the most fondly drawn: he is restless, extravagant and meddlesome, his “Irish soul eager and desirous to make trouble”; an “ambitious dreamer”; a poet who wrote a symbolist poem about Manannán the sea deity; is lovelorn, dejected, and has not the remotest idea that he would once be awarded the Nobel Prize (555, 556, 559).⁸ The security with which Szerb treats his readers to this short story à clef points to the Hungarian reading public's familiarity

with the British literary trends and authors of the previous decades. Also, the allusions to Yeats/Tyrconnel's extravagant mysticism and to his favourite themes, "the swan, the apple tree and the lighthouse" (557), suggest that it was the early phase of Yeats's career that Szerb and his readers were most familiar with.

A considerable number of contributors to *Nyugat* explored the national background of Irish authors in order to establish and explain their distinctness from English cultural and literary traditions. The grounds for such differentiation were the rather vaguely defined categories of temperament and national character that, according to critics publishing in *Nyugat*, set Irish authors apart from their English contemporaries. The Irish character was considered to be entirely different from, and antagonistic to, the English. Moreover, their detachment from what was regarded as the mainstream of English culture granted Irish authors a position of moral and intellectual superiority. Anglo-Irish authors of the past and present were regarded by some Hungarian essayists of the pre- and interwar period as relentless satirists of English hypocrisy and philistinism. In an open letter to H.G. Wells, for instance, the writer and humorist Frigyes Karinthy refers to "the prudery of the English, mocked by the Irish and the Scots" ("Levél H. G. Wells-hez" 142). Swift, Sterne, Wilde, and Shaw were frequently discussed together as major satirists. Gyula Szini's appreciative essay on Shaw clearly points out some tokens of English national identity and character as targets for ridicule:

[Shaw] is a jester. He gets free hand in everything. He is allowed to mock the "Union Jack," the Fleet, the aristocracy's code of honour, even the Anglo-Saxon inclination to prudishness which ruined Lord Byron's peerage and Oscar Wilde's life. He is a bit like the "Sentimental Yorick," the English parson who wrote "Tristram Shandy" and "A Sentimental Journey," and who is said to have lived an immoral life. Yet Lawrence [sic] Sterne's only immorality was his fondness of travelling and cracking cruel jokes on account of the English. ("Shaw margójárá" 229)

A certain kind of satirical bent, together with an inclination to make masterly use of paradox, was also noticed in G. K. Chesterton whose brilliant epigrammatic style ranked him with Oscar Wilde. Mihály Földi discusses him as pertaining to a long tradition of witty Irish satirists: "Chesterton is an Irishman, an Irish poet and thinker. He belongs to the spiritual milieu that gave Swift and Sheridan to the world, out of which Wilde and Shaw were born. The Irish spirit seems to provide writers with the sharp weapon of wit and satire when they set out on their voyage to foggy England [. . .]" (709-10).

In most cases, contrasting Irish and English traits was based on long established notions about the consistency of national character. Sometimes such national stereotyping did not go beyond evoking the reified image of the stage Irishman. Zoltán Szász, the only unfavourable reviewer of Wilde in *Nyugat*, for example, engages in

hostile othering when he directs his attack against both the artist and the man: “[Wilde] was of Irish descent: the English accuse this ancient Celtic race of an inclination to show off, lack of restraint, voluptuousness and frivolousness” (“Wilde Oszkár” 651). Yet in most cases these national dichotomies were cited not to pass value judgments but to contrast the Irish with the English. Hungarian critics meant to stress the cultural and temperamental differences between the two nations. In his essay entitled “Faj és művészet” [Racial character and the arts] Hugó Ignótus finds the justification for the uniqueness of Irish writers in their “Irish blood,” which accounts for their perennial rebellious conflict with the English. “It is almost impossible to grasp the enormous difference,” Ignótus contends, “resting, beyond doubt, in the racial character, between Tennyson, the racially pure Englishman, the Scottish Burns and the Irish Moore, or Swift, or Wilde, or Shaw [. . .]” (716). The argument formulated by Ignótus is in consonance with the frequently voiced opinion in the Hungarian criticism of the period that the English have an inclination to mannered expression, but the Irish spirit is creative and energetic. In her essay on Jonathan Swift, Laura Lengyel takes this assumption one step further when she attributes the most significant manifestations of Irish creativity to a common nationalist strain in the culture:

The Irish race, which has been struggling in England’s hands of steel for centuries, which is sharply distinct from the British race in religion, customs, morals, world view, has provided England with figures of great talent. [. . .] [L]et us but refer, apart from Jonathan Swift, to Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw. Neither Swift, nor Wilde, nor Shaw can be regarded as nationalists. However, some kind of racial nationalism is present in all three authors. (328)

Both Ignótus and Lengyel use the terms “race” and “racial” in the sense of “nation” and “national,” without reference to any kind of biological determinism. Such explorations of national character and temperament had a long tradition in Hungary, reaching back to the early nineteenth century. The idea of the nation as an organic entity, and of culture as the expression of the national genius (*Volkgeist*, or, innate popular consciousness) introduced by Johann Gottfried Herder, had a strong impact in a time when the Habsburg occupation forced the country into semi-colonial dependence, hindering the development of national culture as well. Herder’s prediction, made in *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* [Outlines of a philosophy of the history of man] (1784-1791), about the likelihood of the small nations’ extinction caused serious concern among Hungarian intellectuals of the period, and gave impetus to three generations of Romantic authors to embrace their folk traditions parallel with the modernization of Hungarian language and culture.⁹ After the Compromise of 1867 there was, in Hungarian cultural discourse, a preoccupation with national identity and destiny that continued unbroken for decades. At the turn of the century, in his influential lectures on the theory of literary history at

the University of Budapest, Zsolt Beöthy regarded the full expression of the national spirit as the defining criterion of national literature (9).¹⁰ In the first decades of the twentieth century already existing notions about an inherent national character were reinforced by Wilhelm Wundt's ten-volume *Völkerpsychologie* [Ethnic psychology] (1900-1920), which was read and reviewed in Hungary during the 1920s.¹¹ Salvador de Madariaga's succinct characterizations of nations in *Englishmen, Frenchmen, Spaniards* (1928), was also reviewed and discussed in *Nyugat*.¹²

Notions about the flare of the Irish national character were popular enough to pre-determine perception. Kosztolányi, for example, after his short study trip to the University of Grenoble describes his international experience applying vivid national stereotypes, and gives an enthusiastic account of "[t]he Irish with their red hair [and beard], their ties and souls ablaze" ("Bábel tornya" 248). The impressions Kosztolányi recorded here were consonant with a recurring pattern in Hungarian criticism of Irish literature: the endowment of the oppressed Irish with a primordial spiritual energy that re-vitalizes the culture of their English oppressor. The literary historian, creative writer and regular contributor of *Nyugat*, Antal Szerb remarks in *Az angol irodalom kis tükre* [A short history of English literature] published in 1929 that "[t]he nationalist aspirations and the liberating spirit of the Irish have brought the element of novelty to English literature." Whereas, he adds, Shaw and Chesterton do not consider their Irishness relevant, Yeats fashioned a national identity out of the storehouse of Celtic mythology. "[W]ith Yeats," Szerb continues, "day-dreaming becomes a national act; for him, the life of the imagination, immersion in myth, visions are the best expressions of the Irish national character, these are most suitable for the Irish spirit" (*Az angol irodalom kis tükre* 237).

When writing about Irish authors, Szerb tended to ascribe the distinctness of their work to the overlaying influence of myth. In *A világirodalom története* [A history of world literature], published in 1941, Szerb dedicates a long discussion to the Celtic origins of Irish mythology. He then makes a suggestion about the persisting influence of this mythology on "the Irish mind" (169). A well-informed researcher of English literature, Szerb relies, first of all, on Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) when he remarks that "[t]he characteristics of Celtic legends are unbridled, rambling imagination, hyperbole and exaggeration" (169). An indirect influence, however, of the study by Lajos Prohászka, *A vándor és a bujdosó* [The wanderer and the exile], first published between 1932-1935,¹³ is also discernible in Szerb's hypothesis about the residual Celtic character of the Irish. Prohászka, following the approach of the history of ideas, set out to grasp the essence of national character in the collective historical experience, and pointed out the influence of such accumulated experience on the collective spirit and cultural memory of a nation. After proposing a typology of some European nations' psychological and spiritual traits he outlines the basic attributes of the Hungarian character, his point of departure being their early history. Prohászka traces some consistent patterns of collective behaviour throughout the modern history of the Hungarian nation. Let a small detail illustrate the

general note of the argument:

The French, the Italian or even the English strive to regulate their affectivity, to anchor it in tradition, or put it into the service of a sense of mission. The affectivity of the Hungarian, on the other hand, is unbound and rambling, its intentionality wavering and diffuse, moreover, fantastic. [. . .] In this unorganized affectivity [. . .] lies the perennial childishness of the Hungarian spirit. (131)

Szerb must have received as much encouragement from Prohászka's approach as from Arnold's when he claimed that "it is the living Celtic folk spirit that enriches [Irish] literature," the Celtic Twilight movement being nurtured "not so much by the traditions of the Celtic past, but by the means of the living Celtic national spirit" (785). Continuing his discussion of turn-of-the-century Irish literature with the early work of Yeats, he points out that in his poetry inspired by Celtic mythology "he revives not only the object but also the spirit that created these myths. [. . .] For the Irish, or at least for Yeats, the transcendental is immanent, the other world is present in this earthly one, if only one has eyes to see, if only one knows entrancement, intuition" (785-86).

Szerb was interested in how it was possible to reconstruct, from the residues of myth and by the means of poetry, a nation's inherent, essential spiritual heritage. When addressing this issue, referring either to the Irish or to the Hungarians, he uses a similar argument and register. It is a particular affinity to the mythical, the presence of the preternatural in the colloquial experience that Szerb regards as the essential quality of both nations' spirit and character. For a reconstruction of his likeminded regard of Hungarians we can find clues in an earlier essay, "A magyarság mitikus arca" [The mythic face of Hungarians], published in 1926. Here Szerb suggested that there must have been a more enigmatic and glorious picture, the "mythic vision of Hungarians" persisting in the early Medieval European imagination. He argues by bringing up the example of a certain Klingsor von Ungerlant, a minor character in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. There is in the novel a recounting of the Wartburg contest of singers where the adversary of Wolfram von Eschenbach is Klingsor, a Hungarian singer with magical talent. His figure is ample evidence for Szerb that Germans and other Europeans looked upon Hungary as "the land of singers and enchanters" (57), this deeply imprinted pattern surviving relatively intact over centuries, and serving the artistic purposes of an influential pre-romantic like Novalis. Szerb's appealing hypothesis may not be accurate, but was shared by other Hungarian authors as well. A piece of short fiction by the writer István Komor published in a 1931 issue of *Nyugat* also engages in the theme of some people's affinity to the irrational and the fabulous, and suggests that the Hungarian character shares many features with the Celtic. Komor's writing is a playful pastiche set in the seventeenth century, a romance and ghost story combined, involving an Austrian general, a beautiful ghost dame with a

falcon, and the young René Descartes. Touching upon the theme of ghosts, Komor remarks that “[t]he Spaniard feels anxiety on Hungarian soil, and so do the Germans, Walloons, Italians. The Scottish and the Irish, on the contrary, feel at home [. . .], for their ghosts, spirits are similar to those of the Hungarians. Thus, they are not frightened, moreover, can even engage in conversation with them” (67).

However, beginning with the rise, in 1933, of National Socialism in Germany, the term “race” acquired a darker and politically charged note which was sensed early in Hungarian journalism. The relevance of the history of ideas lost momentum in Hungary, not least because of its availability for tentative ideological appropriation. Thus, after the mid-1930s essayists eliminated the word “race” and “national character” from their vocabulary. As a result of this, throughout the Second World War and in the ensuing three decades the social, historical, and cultural uniqueness of Ireland and Irish literature were not discussed significantly. Instead of explaining the distinctness of Irish authors with their special nature and condition, Hungarian critics restricted their approach to strictly literary criteria, abandoning the cultural ones that were previously thought to give these texts prominence.

Artistic Eminence without National Distinctness: Concluding Remarks

In interwar Hungary, earlier and modern Irish authors were most often considered within the context of English literature, but their national characteristics were brought into prominence. In this period the opening to major European literatures by translation and critical reception was part of the process of cultural modernization. Undoubtedly, the three generations of Modernist authors whose careers were related to the literary periodical *Nyugat* contributed substantially to the presence of Irish authors, both earlier and contemporary, on the Hungarian literary scene. By their translations and criticism the Modernist authors of the interwar period were instrumental in establishing a European literary canon that included the most relevant writers with an Irish background. Still, the reception of Irish authors in this period was rather uneven. Of the contemporary authors Oscar Wilde made the most powerful impact on Hungarian authors and critics. He was the most widely translated Irish author in the first decades of the twentieth century, preserving his popularity during the entire interwar period. Whereas Wilde was primarily a source of inspiration and model for the *l’art pour l’art* strain in Hungarian literature, Yeats was more difficult to integrate. The late Yeats’s modernity was acknowledged by the high Modernist poet, translator, critic and editor Mihály Babits, but a wider scale of translation of his poetry was undertaken only much later, beginning with the 1970s.

Also, it was in the decade following the First World War that Irish literature was conceived as the expression of a national spirit in opposition to the English. The Irish were labelled as relentless satirists who criticized English orderliness and philistinism. This tradition was traced back to Swift, Sterne, and Sheridan, and its

persistence attributed to Shaw and Wilde. In addition to their satirical bent, the Irish were considered to be extremely creative and spiritually energetic. Such an idealized image was, on the one hand, a reversal of Matthew Arnold's rather negatively biased stereotypes of the Irish and, on the other hand, derived from the various discourses of national characterology present on the Hungarian cultural scene. By envisaging a psychological affinity with the "Celtic race" Hungarian critics could pinpoint their own nation's spiritual and cultural uniqueness. In the discussions about the legacy of national culture and literature one of the key concepts was "race," a notion that was already present in turn-of-the-century criticism, and taken over, with its meaning of "nationality," by critics embracing the approach of the history of ideas.

Yet with the discrediting of the term "race" during the 1930s, awareness of Irish uniqueness waned. A telling example of this blind spot is the case of James Joyce's reception. Miklós Szentkuthy, whose 1974 translation of *Ulysses*¹⁴ is now the standard Hungarian version of the novel, was instrumental in familiarizing Hungarian readers with the work of Joyce. However, even he approached *Ulysses* without paying much attention to the Irish contexts of the novel. In the critical essay "James Joyce," dated 1947, Szentkuthy offers an appreciative consideration of *Ulysses*, discussing the novel together with the work of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, Joyce's Irish background all but forgotten. He points out as a common feature the three authors' stream of consciousness technique, untouched in its essence by Freudian psychoanalysis. Instead, argues Szentkuthy, all three of them are "English empiricists who care nothing for theoretical hocus-pocus." He suggests that their inclination to psychological realism derives from a "narrow-minded practicality" and a "humorous, curiosity-hunting, silly hobby-horse" motivation, concluding about the three authors that "one is more English than the other" (106). In Szentkuthy's analysis Joyce is contextualized with the medieval *danse macabre*, the paintings of Holbein and Van Eyck, the works of Shakespeare and Webster (104, 107), without any mention of Joyce's investment in Irish history and culture. Although he makes a brief and rather sketchy remark, close to the conclusion of the essay, that Joyce was "the most Irish among Irishmen" and his novel "the logical continuation of the ancient Celtic art," Szentkuthy brings his essay to a close with the surprising conclusion that the realistic representation of the mental process by the novel's stream of consciousness narrative is the work of "a practical, all too sober Englishman" (111, 114).

Thus, in the pre- and interwar period, Hungarian critical discourse about Irish literature and culture provided important insights into Irish literature and culture even if there were gaps in the reception of, for instance, the mature Yeats. Due to contributors to the journal *Nyugat*, most of them leading Modernist writers and literary critics who provided excellent translations and insightful criticism, Irish authors were conspicuously present on the Hungarian literary scene and gave impetus to literary experimentation and critical thought. Reflections about Irish literature and culture in the given decades were instrumental to introducing Hungarian readers to the European experience of modernity.

Notes

¹ *Salome*. Trans. Gyula Szini (Budapest: Lampel, 1903).

² “A readingi fegyház balladája” [“The Ballad of Reading Gaol”] *Nyugat* 19.10 (16 May 1926): 892-99; *A páduai hercegnő* [“The Duchess of Padua”] (Budapest: Lampel, 1910); *Dorian Gray arcképe* [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] (Budapest: Genius, 1922); *Salome* (Budapest: Genius, 1923). Dezső Kosztolányi was not the first to translate either *Dorian Gray* or *Salome*, but being an inspired stylist as well as a great poet and novelist he produced the most accomplished translations to this day. Before Kosztolányi, *Salome* was translated by Gyula Szini (Budapest: Lampel, 1903) and Géza Battkay (Budapest: Révai, 1907); *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Aladár Schöpflin (*Dorian Gray arcképe*. Budapest: Lampel, 1907).

³ Previously, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” had been translated by József Kun, Lóránt Thaly and Antal Radó. The first translation published in *Nyugat* was the work of Árpád Tóth, *Nyugat* 12.14-15 (June 1919): 954-73. The poem was also published later in the translation of Kosztolányi, in *Nyugat* 19.10 (16 May 1926): 892-99.

⁴ Lőrinc Szabó dedicated an essay to the discussion of Árpád Tóth’s translation of “Reading Gaol,” entitled “Tóth Árpád Wilde-fordítása,” in *Nyugat* 14.10 (16 May 1921): 790-93. Dezső Kosztolányi’s later, 1926 version was commented on by fellow writer and friend Frigyes Karinthy in “Kosztolányi: ‘Readingi fegyház’” in *Nyugat* 19.12 (16 June 1926): 1103-04. The translation of “Charmides” by Mihály Babits, published in *Nyugat* 4.8 (16 April 1911): 705-18, was anthologized in his 1920 volume of translations *Pávatollak* [Peacock Feathers]. The volume was reviewed by Árpád Tóth who, discussing the translation of “Charmides,” considered it to be, along with that of Tennyson’s “Lotus-Eaters,” the best piece in the volume. See “Babits műfordításai: *Pávatollak*” [The Translations of Babits: Peacock Feathers] *Nyugat* 13.3-4 (February 1920): 212-15. In 1940 a posthumous collection of Babits’s translations of poetry, *Babits Mihály kisebb műfordításai* [Minor Translations of Mihály Babits], was reviewed by György Rónay who also praises “Charmides” as a masterful rendering of Wilde’s poem. See “Babits a fordító” [Babits the translator] *Nyugat* 33.1 (January 1940): 48-51.

⁵ The titles of volumes are Lóránt Czigány’s translations (*A History of Hungarian Literature from the Earliest Times to the Mid-1970s*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

⁶ Gál was the first to point out Wildean influences in the work of Babits in his seminal study *Babits és az angol irodalom* [Babits and English Literature], 44-45. Such influences, according to him, appear in artistic settings and scenes, sharp dialogues, decorative images.

⁷ B.M. (Mihály Babits), “Angol költők a huszadik században. Binét Menyhért versfordításai” [English poets in the twentieth century. Translations by Menyhért Binét]. *Nyugat* 25 (16 June 1932): 728.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Hungarian are mine.

⁹ For a discussion of Herder’s impact on conceptions of culture and nationality in Hungary and the neighbouring countries see Iván Berend T., *History Derailed:*

Central and Eastern Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003): 46-49.

¹⁰ Beöthy's volume *Az irodalomtörténet elmélete* [The theory of literary history] (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, 1940) contains his 1901-1902 lectures at Budapest University.

¹¹ In *Nyugat*, most references to Wundt occur in reviews of Hungarian works. There is one review essay evaluating his work: György Király, "Wundt" in *Nyugat* 13.19-20 (October 1920): 988-89. On the impact of Wundt on Hungarian philosophy in the interwar period see Ferenc Pataki, "Nemzetkarakterológia?" [National characterology?] *Magyar Tudomány* (February 1997): 169-79.

¹² Olivér Brachfeld, "Spanyol nagyságok tündöklése és bukása" [The rise and fall of Spanish notabilities], *Nyugat* 28.6 (June 1935): 518-19; László Passuth, "Madariaga," *Nyugat* 19.7 (July 1936): 63-65; Gyula Ortutay, "Kolumbusz Kristóf. Salvador de Madariaga könyve" [Review of *Christopher Columbus* by Salvador de Madariaga], *Nyugat* 34.2 (1 February 1941): 73-74.

¹³ Lajos Prohászka's study was published in installments in the periodical *Minerva* between 1932 and 1935, and in book form in 1936 (Budapest: Minerva Könyvtár).

¹⁴ *Ulysses* was translated by Endre Gáspár (Budapest: Nova, 1943) and Miklós Szentkuthy (Budapest: Európa, 1974). For a detailed discussion of the Hungarian reception of Joyce see Márta Goldmann, "Belated Reception: James Joyce's Work in Hungary" *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.3 (2006): 227-48.

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