

**Mihály Babits:
Creative Imitation¹**

Written in the June of 1938

Creative imitation. - No matter how much of a death-sentence this is on today's literary market: I have to confess, that I too have imitated foreign writers. But not while unaware of it, like how everyone is usually under someone's influence, at least in the beginning, because the act of self-creation and immaculate conception could be counted as a miracle. No, I imitated consciously and on purpose! All my effort went into being perfectly akin to my selected model, or at least akin to the image of them that lived in my mind. My only excuse could be the fact that this image hardly resembled the original.

Because I imitated a bunch of writers who I've not read. As soon as I read them, it was possible that I didn't find them interesting any more. But as long as only a name remained – mostly a pretty, elegant and enigmatic foreign-sounding name – and if I only read newspaper articles and heard fragmentary claims from literary snobs about the name's bearer: until then it excited me like a foreign land, a never seen landscape, with unbeatable nostalgia! I wanted to stand in the middle of that unknown land, to breath in the mood, colours, rhythm and air of that landscape...

Getting the books of the author would have been the most straightforward thing... But this was often met with difficulties. The books were either expensive; or I didn't understand the language and a Hungarian translation didn't exist yet. Back in the days of my idyllic youth for example, which could be more aptly described as my thirsty youth... It also happened, at least during my student years, that the seductive territory was forbidden. At the age of fifteen, I had to promise my father, that I wouldn't pick up the works of certain writers: These were “*not for me*” just yet. I was a guileless country-boy. I kept my promise fair and square.

But I didn't give up on the “realm of the unknown”. If I couldn't read (for example) a Zola-novel, - I could at least write myself one! And I did. I wrote a Zola-novel, a Maupassant-short story – the way a kid could imagine the straightforward, raw or “*modern*” portrayal of this bloody, dirty and exciting life – of the great and capital letter Life. Sadly, these childish works have long been lost. Had they survived, they would serve as a reminder of what the name of an author declared forbidden meant to a thirsty teenager.

Just their name – the Proustian allure of their name! It might very well be that there's not a greater allure. For example when I later got my hands on a genuine Zola-work, it was a borderline disappointment. It wasn't what I wanted to enthusiastically reconstruct based on my fantasies any more. It was a novel like any other, no matter how great and daring. And what it described was the vulgar, lowercase life. A Zola-novel, nothing else... a Maupassant-volume. And then came a time when I didn't necessarily want to read the newly discovered author. It was better to imagine him based on the critiques and analyses that I came across, rather than to check if my conceptions were true.

Not to mention that my inclination to read decreased as years passed: I also had less time. But my imagination continued to work, and was filled with the excitement for newer and newer intellectual realms as soon as I heard a new writer's name resound around me, or an old one's, whom I haven't heard of before. One time I happened to get a hold of a special issue of a journal by chance that was published *in memoriam* of Henry James, whom I haven't read a single word from. And I didn't get in the mood to read under the influence of the special issue; but I got jealous of one of the type of short stories he wrote during one period his life, and which were characterised very interestingly in the accompanying appraisal. I wanted to write something similar. I'm not going to tell which of my short stories was written this way, but it's not the worst one, for sure. The reader won't be able to recognise it because (as I later found out) it has nothing to do with the real Henry James. It's amazing how much it has nothing in common with his. My short story was imitating a

¹ Chapter Seven of the book “*All over my life*”. The title is probably a play on the title of Henri Bergson's book “*Creative Evolution*”. (Babits himself declared that he's a follower of Bergson's philosophy on multiple occasions)

non-existent original. Sometimes imitation can create: it can create something that the world hasn't seen yet, and without it, it wouldn't have seen it.

Jeopardy. - That makes me think of Jeopardy, Cecil M. Jeopardy, the deep and strange Australian writer who was born at Karinthy's flat back in the day, during a young winter night filled with arguments. If I recall correctly, it was "*three of them together*"², Karinthy³, Kosztolányi⁴ and I. We breathed life into the great Jeopardy. This was an honest act of creation: Three authors created a fourth one who would have differed from the other three; a new figure, a new name in literature. What kind of instinct could make an author leave himself behind and become *another* author? Maybe he wants to live out his lost potentials: because we're all more than what we are, and in every writer lives many other writers besides the one that life and circumstance allowed to evolve: to multiply, to become somebody else, simply, to get into the soul of another writer, to learn their secrets, to dissect and reassemble their creations. Criticism, imitation and parody are all born from the same spiritual necessity; and pastiche is as old as literature itself. Maybe this was what gave birth to the apocryphal texts of the Old Testament.

But all of this doesn't always satisfy the writer's insatiability. It's not enough for him to re-live within himself the souls and secrets of writers who lived and wrote before him. Sometimes he'd like to try out something completely new: Who hasn't entertained the thought to restart under a pseudonym after a long literary career, being unknown to the public, in a new style with such forms and experiments that their own name and past wouldn't permit them? Or to travel abroad and become an English writer: wouldn't that be like comparing a caterpillar to a butterfly?

And an Australian writer to top it all off!⁵

But Jeopardy wasn't birthed through instinct: or at least no one thought about that back then. Jeopardy wasn't meant to be anything more than a derisive prank, an April's fool joke, a campaign against literary snobs. We were already overjoyed in anticipation from imagining the faces of people who are afraid to confess they've read nothing by Jeopardy; of those who swear they saw a rare, first edition of one of his works; of those who compared the German translation to the original. And that ecstatic blissfulness as they hear a meaningless quote that was specifically created just for them; "Of course, you know that wonderfully deep line by Jeopardy" and so on. We immediately began creating things like these and we divided the work among ourselves. I'd write an essay on Jeopardy, in the style of Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*; Kosztolányi was going to translate from his poetry, and Karinthy was going to parody his works and style.

We imagined people storming popular book stores to get Jeopardy's books.

But first we had to give our character a uniform outline, to create his personality at large, to determine his milieu and to determine the major events of his life, lest our stories contradict one another. (A little contradiction in smaller details doesn't hurt, it even helps the myth grow.) Jeopardy had to become a myth, a mysterious figure, whose secret only we knew. We started drawing his face with real passion – we couldn't make him too parodic, lest our intent become too apparent. We laughed, but secretly, we enjoyed it and were amazed by it. We were the very first snobs at the forefront of the audience we wanted to prank. Jeopardy impressed us too, since we added everything to him that secretly impressed us. We raced to enrich his figure, and we flouted him like we flouted ourselves, or our most sacred idols, in this careless, young age of ours. Secretly, all of us were Jeopardy.

2 A quote from a poem by János Garay

3 Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938) Hungarian journalist, author, poet, translator and parodist. In Hungary he is remembered for his literary parodies of contemporary authors and his short story collection, "*Please, Sir!*"

4 Dezső Kosztolányi (1885-1936) Hungarian journalist, novelist, poet and translator. Kosztolányi was a prominent member of the first-generation of contributors to the *Nyugat*-journal. He was also a good friend of Karinthy. He is remembered for his poetry and such novels as "*Anna Édes*" and "*Skylark*".

5 Babits in this piece describes Jeopardy as an Australian writer. Frigyes Karinthy published a few of "Jeopardy's" aphorisms in his literary parody collection "*This is how YOU write!*". In that volume, he describes Jeopardy as a Hindu poet living on an island near Madagascar.

The reason for this difference is either that Babits remembers it incorrectly, or Karinthy decided to make the joke obvious.

Though our plan (to put Jeopardy's name into the consciousness) didn't really succeed; the cause of it was ourselves, our laziness and carelessness. I didn't write the Jeopardy essay, Kosztolányi didn't translate Jeopardy-poems, only Karinthy published a few of Jeopardy's aphorism⁶ (obviously, Jeopardy was an aphoristic spirit, and as such, was one of the deepest of his kind.) Some of our fellow writers who had a sense of humour joined in on the joke; Heltai⁷ for example in one of his excellent and humorous novels took the motto from Jeopardy for one the chapters. One of our other friends quoted one of his deep sayings from his novel titled *Under the golden Key* in an editorial. (We made up this title too.) There were a few naive snobs who got taken in by the joke; and we laughed at such cases with Karinthy on multiple occasions. But I have to confess, that for me, Jeopardy meant and to this day means something else besides a simple prank or hoax. I didn't write that essay on him, (maybe exactly because the subject was more serious to me, than to let myself flout about it); but the figure of the great Australian writer haunts me even today, sometimes as if it were a reality, which I'll have to reckon with one day. Most of the time it appears as a wishful dream, that one should escape into. Or a world, that should be created.

6 Some Jeopardy aphorisms Karinthy published:

“The mountaintops are above”

“Fishes don't lie”

“Present is the past of the future” (Karinthy's official English translation.)

7 Jenő Heltai (1871-1957) Hungarian novelist, poet and journalist.