

## Amrita Sher-Gil and Hungarian Literature

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"As a rule I dislike biographies and autobiographies. They ring false. Pomposity and exhibitionism. But I think I will like yours. You are able to discard your halo occasionally, you are capable of saying-'When I saw the sea for the first time' where others would say 'When the sea saw me for the first time'. I should have known you better. I am always attracted to people who are integral enough to be inconsistent without discordancy- and who don't trail viscious threads of regret behind them." (Amrita Sher-Gil to Jawaharlal Nehru)

The diaries, essays and correspondence of Amrita Sher-Gil form the "primary narrative " of what has been aptly called "a self-portrait in letters and writing". This publication - *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings* – and the recent exhibition "Amrita Sher-Gil – The Magyar Connection" provide the opportunity for briefly exploring the issue of Amrita Sher-Gil's connection with Hungarian literature. The "self-portrait" includes the two childhood diaries of Amrita. As was the custom in those days, one diary book she received from her uncle Ervin, Ervin Baktay (1890–1963), the famous Hungarian indologist "on behalf of little Jesus" in 1920<sup>1</sup> and the second one was gifted by her mother, Marie-Antoinette in 1924. Amrita wrote her diary entries exclusively in Hungarian in the years 1920-1924 and in Hungarian and English in 1924-29. These diaries are textual-pictorial commentaries of her childhood interests. One of the important aspects of the diaries is the evidence of her dual cultural world as a Hungarian and at the same time an Indian girl. The text, drawings and paintings, Indian and Hungarian tales and characters complement each other, and show the Magyar- Indian relationship in the cultural field of Amrita Sher-Gil's work. Amrita Sher-Gil profited from what was / and to some extent still is common in the historical, artistic and domestic situation of India and Hungary in comparison with the West. In her case the West was France, Italy and Britain. Her ideas of Indian modernity and the way of becoming a modern Indian painter were shaped mainly by modern Hungarian literature and music.

The other aspect, which is perhaps included in the title of 'self-portrait', is that the diaries and letters addressed to various persons form a 'true' biography of her life, with a tapestry of events, locations and characters. Her prose shows the kind of inconsistency without discordancy that she highlights in her letter to Nehru, after he sent her his autobiography, which is also the motto of this paper.<sup>2</sup> Amrita's childhood diary also records her wars with other children and a pattern of loves and hatred. The Augustin children, or Ervin Baktay who came to India in 1926 are mentioned in the letters again in the later years now in the tone of the adult and this makes the letters seem like lacework.

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<sup>1</sup> Vivan Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings*, Tulika Books, 2010,p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.p.419

## Voice

Amrita received the second diary from her mother in Florence in 1924 with the dedication "To my beautiful little Amrita as a birthday gift for her diary notes with love from her upto the grave faithful, adoring, loving anyuska".<sup>3</sup> This sweet, sugary style is imitated by Amrita at this early stage. She paints Marie-Antoinette and gives the picture the title "The dear angel Mucika in her comfortable armchair".<sup>4</sup> When she narrates the events of departing from India to Italy, she remembers "drága, angyal"(dear angel) and "egyetlen" (only)" apuka"(daddy).<sup>5</sup>In the second diary she tries out ways of addressing the reader "Now pleasant reader, if you don't mind, I relate a mishap which squeezed me into my bed."<sup>6</sup> The tone of this entry shows that she became acquainted with other literary diaries and learned the art of telling via imitation.

The voice of her letters soon changes, becomes more self assured and she is able to work out issues with her family and cousins. She asks her cousin Amarjit in 1929 on the eve of departing for Europe why he did not write to her "I really fail to see why you should have neglected writing to me all this while . What on earth were you peeved over?"<sup>7</sup>

She also develops a direct way of handling critical issues with her family about various alliances, proposals to her and her sister Indira and dares to be inconsistent. Yusuf was one of her suitors who was supposed to marry her. At the time of his visit to Budapest she firmly tells her mother in 1931:"You leave the Yusuf affair to me.", and also "After all I am going to decide whether I want to marry him or not, and it is I who will have the final say by October."<sup>8</sup>

Confidence in her own work is apparent in the letter she wrote to her mother from Paris in 1932 "To my greatest astonishment and to everybody's surprise I did not win the Prize, which this year was awarded 'to the most modern'. ...But I am not at all depressed because I know that I have produced excellent pieces."<sup>9</sup> She gives an account of the intensity of work, the six large portraits she submitted, the nude of Indu she is working on and an additional piece of work, the view of the Notre Dame.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.p.17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.p.36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.p.55.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.p.61.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.79.

She is just nineteen when she comes up with a perceptive criticism of her mother's personality "You have always, quite rightly, insisted one must not look at things darkly and that one must look ahead with optimism and hope, you always ruin your nerves with brooding."<sup>10</sup> The same year (1932), in summer Amrita writes to her mother to "Dear, only Muckó" from Zebegény "I notice that you are leading a social life and you know that this adds greatly to your breakdowns. Please take care that you don't get involved in any political talk with the English..."<sup>11</sup> She tells her mother she did not like her "verbal brutality" with servants.<sup>12</sup> In 1938 she warns her mother not to be eaten up by obsession with people, and that consuming herself can become a "pernicious"<sup>13</sup> habit.

In the early childhood notes in Hungarian (1920-24) we can see energy, and openness coupled with intelligence, and that "ferocity of the mind" and "unashamed openness" that Salman Rushdie refers to in his foreword to *A self-portrait in letters&writings*.<sup>14</sup> Fairy tales, in Hungarian 'tündérmese' was a genre that introduced Amrita to literature and her 1924 diary opens with fairy tales. One of her sources might have been Uncle Pósa's tales. Lajos Pósa (1850-1914) was a celebrated personality in the 1880s and he also established a children's journal with the title *Az én újságom*.<sup>15</sup> Pósa's publications in the beginning of the twentieth century reflect the tone of 'sugary sweetness' addressed to the children, but his tales have many elements of horror in the plot.

In the 1920-24 diary the entries of tales about the little girl and the fairies, the beginning ("Once upon a time there was a little girl" ) and the plot are developed in five variations, each in different combinations, each adding a new element to the characters and to the plot: 1. the poor little girl, 2. the poor little girl and the Eagle king (*saskirály*), 3. the poor little girl and the fairy, 4. the golden castle, the fairy and her three daughters, 5. The fairy girl and fairy boy etc. One can see a similar development in the visual elaboration of the tales with more characters, and more details drawn or painted.<sup>16</sup> The childhood paintings and drawings in the exhibition

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.p.63.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.p.83.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p179.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.p.439.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.p.XI.

<sup>15</sup> <http://posalajos.com/lapok/> accessed on 23.4.2013.

<sup>16</sup> Vivan Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings*, Tulika Books, 2010,pp.2-15.

curated by Navina Sundaram give an insight in this aspect.<sup>17</sup> In the diaries the pictures and the tales constitute together the texture of the book.

## Language

Amrita Sher-Gil had a gift for languages like her father, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil who was a scholar of several languages even though he never learned Hungarian and acquired the ability to express herself creatively in Hungarian, English, and French at an early age. She was born in Hungary and her first school going years were spent in Hungary where she received a good grounding in the language. Her first diary was written exclusively in Hungarian. Her mother, born Gottesman, also knew several languages though it seems that not all members of the Gottesman family, were so fluent. An exception was Ervin Baktay, Marie Antoinette's brother, the Indologist who knew twenty two languages. Öcsi, Viktor Egan Amrita's cousin who became her husband, learned English only after coming to India and Blanka, Marie Antoinette's sister never learned English. Amrita structured her sentences on the basis of her Hungarian: Of all the specific features of Hungarian flexible word order and large compound sentences are characteristic for her writing. Such is the sentence in which she puts forward her ideas about beauty and her art in English in a letter to R.C.Tandan, the art critic in 1935: "It may be that the sadness; the queer ugliness of the types I choose as my models (which to me is beauty that renders insipid all that which according to the standards of the world goes under the category of the word 'Beautiful') corresponds something in me, some inner trail in my nature which responds to things that are sad, rather than to manifestations of life which are exuberantly happy or placidly contented."<sup>18</sup> Amrita most readily availed of the specific metaphoric use of adjectives, a characteristic of Hungarian that adds to the vivacity of her language, to Karl Kandlwala she mentions "that beastly brochure".<sup>19</sup>

She constructs her expressions and sentences in English with a Hungarian structure "I cordially detest the rest of the family".<sup>20</sup> The cumulation of clauses, which characterize Hungarian is a further example as in the following: "At present I am writing on the shore of the Danube sunning myself the while, i.e.killing two birds with one stone, with old Aaron bácsi (Baba's father-in-law), who is the dearest, sweetest, darlingest old gentleman who ever lived, the more to his credit as he is a priest, by my side."<sup>21</sup>

Hungarian punctures her language. In her letters written in English she switches to Hungarian in cultural or existential contexts. For example: "Befutok mint karácsonyi ajándék, szép kis

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<sup>17</sup> "Amrita Sher-Gil – The Magyar Connection" curated by Navina Sundaram in the Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre, 1st January-1st March, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Vivan Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings*, Tulika Books, 2010,p.257.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*p.599.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*p. 443.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*p.141.

karácsonyi ajándék mi? És főleg drága?”<sup>22</sup>(I will arrive as a Christmas present, and a beautiful Christmas present it is – and very expensive.) The Hungarian note on Donna Carola "szóval szörnyen oda mondtam neki"<sup>23</sup>, (I gave her a piece of my mind) or a humorous abuse to Indu "Írjál, aljas gazember!"<sup>24</sup> (Write, you mean bastard) in letters written in English. This is part of the light-minded humorous relationship to the world, shared by the two sisters where the parents can only occasionally join in. As Indira writes to their friend, Denise "I was very happy to meet my parents but mainly Amri. I only now realize how much I need her."<sup>25</sup>

For the names of institutions, fines or the list of permissions and taxes in Hungary she uses Hungarian. One can see this in the letters where she describes the difficulties to have Öcsi released from the army in 1939 and procure the necessary documents to bring him to India. For example, "kivándorlási adó" (emigration tax), "kaució" (caution money), "Belügyminisztérium" (Ministry of Internal Affairs)<sup>26</sup>. The Hungarian sentences and expressions, which she uses in her letters in English widen the range of themes and introduce wider emotional pitches. On the threshold of the war we can sense the anxiety and desperation with which she is trying to extract Victor from Hungary and begs for more help from the family.

#### Modernity in Music and Literature

#### Portrait of the Pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890 – 1963)

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.p.105.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.p.235.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.p.99.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.p.224.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.pp.573-577.



Benno Moiseiwitsch



Marie-Antoinette was an amateur singer and both Indira and Amrita played the piano. Music had a profound influence on Amrita's childhood, personality and life and the diaries and the correspondence reflect this important interest in her life. Amrita gave up playing music only when she decided that she could not pursue the piano along with painting. She got acquainted with Chopin, Debussy, Palmgren, Puccini and others in her childhood. In 1926 she describes the effect music had on her played by various musicians. She writes about the rich, deep violin notes of Jascha Heifetz "which seem to come from the heart of the youthful violinist." In her diary she tries to combine the two media visual and audial and goes on further : "And I can hardly imagine that one so young could feel so intensely, as I look at his fascinating face in the photograph on the wall with its clear blue eyes looking straight towards you which I would call speaking eyes, so expressive they are. And his gold hair hangs in curly locks..., his adorable round face and his handsome lips and the charming dimples on his chin....".<sup>27</sup> While her mother liked Puccini and Tchaikovsky, Amrita listened to modern composers like Bartók. She writes about her experiences to her parents: "Yesterday we went to a very lovely concert with Ernő Kiss. Bartók and Waldbauer played a piano and violin sonata. Bartók has an amazingly interesting presence, and plays wonderfully."<sup>28</sup> The role of music in her art was not explored, but the kind of modernity that Bartók developed with new rhythmic patterns, and the way Bartók explored unusual instrumental colors must have stimulated Amrita as a modernist. It probably fostered her understanding of her task as an artist to seek line, form and colour. Amrita rejected "Cheap, emotional appeal" in connection with Indian art<sup>29</sup> and film, and dismissed "sentimental mysticism" in the case of the paintings of Elizabeth Sass-Brunner<sup>30</sup>, rejecting many painters of the Bengal school for example Nandalal Bose, but selecting Tagore's pictorial art as specially good. She places at the highest point what is connected with the soil. As she describes it to R.C. Tandan in 1936 : "Flat grey lands, bullock carts, the villages in yellow mud.", which express the life of Indian poor beyond a plane of "sentimental interest".<sup>31</sup>

The childhood diaries show Amrita's earliest engagement with Hungarian literature, first with fairy tales and then later with the ballads of József Kiss and János Arany. The Hungarian 'ballada' is different from the English ballad in form, drama and intensity, more similar to the German 'Ballade' such as Schiller's or Heine's ballads. János Arany(1817-1882) raised the ballad to a high literary level, with intensity, dramatic tension, tragedy and many details left in the dark. Many of Arany's ballads like *Mistress Ágnes*, *Klára Zach*, *Vörös Rébék*, *The Ordeal of*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.pp.35-36.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.p.119.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.p.423.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.p.399.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.p.257.

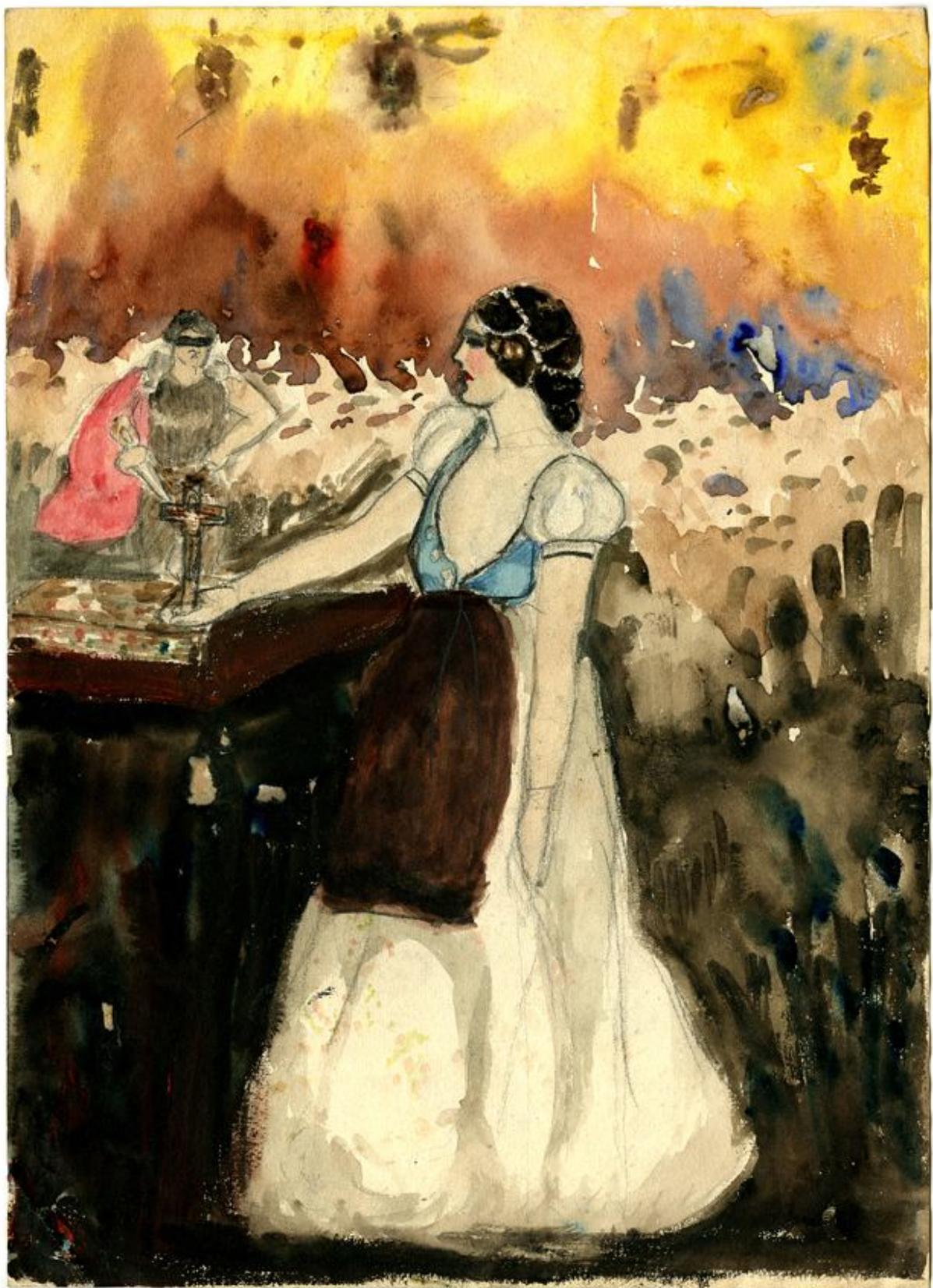
*the Bier* are set to music and adapted to paintings. József Kiss (1843-1921) was a follower of Arany in the ballad tradition, and wrote a number of ballads many of them in folk style, and also many themes from Jewish village life. Amrita seems to have liked these ballads of dramatic intensity and they gave her a grounding in Hungarian literature. *Rabasszony*, (The Slave Woman), Zsuzsánna Nemes Nagy killed her husband for betraying her by Csali patak and Amrita adapted the ballad in a painting. *A szép Batóné* (Beautiful Mrs. Bató) was another ballad by József Kiss which was illustrated by Amrita. Yet another picture depicts Fatia Negra, in Mór Jókai's novel, *Szegény gazdagok, Poor Rich*.<sup>32</sup> Fatia Negra in Transylvania has an illegal mine-minting press, ensnares married women and hides his identity wearing a black mask. These were shown in the exhibition in the Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre curated by Navina Sundaram. *Savitri* was added to this pantheon after the Sher-Gil family shifted to India.<sup>33</sup>

Mór Jókai "Poor Rich"

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.8, pp.14-15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.p.10.



There is a strong sensuality in the visual presentation of female bodies and body positions. One can also see in the diaries a great attraction to the bride, the childbride, the "beautiful lovely girl" who is lonely, "her weariness" , "lovely, liquid, dark eyes", "finely curved and rose-hued lips". In the second diary she narrates a visit to a wedding where she describes the beauty of the bride, and develops a phantasy "Poor little bride, you little know that perhaps you might only live a year. You are doomed and yet do not realize.." <sup>34</sup> We saw the presence of the female body in her harem phantasies also present in some drawings in the exhibition.

Dance Performance

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.p.29.



Amrita's later engagement with literature led her to the poetry of Endre Ady(1877-1919). Ady's poems are often discussed and quoted in her letters. Her love for Ady's poetry was characteristic of her generation and the generation before her, for example the members of the famous Sunday Circle in Budapest in the early twentieth century with Béla Balázs, Georg Lukács, Arnold Hauser, Lajos Fülöp claimed that they spoke Ady's language.<sup>35</sup> Ady created the notion of 'Magyar Ugar', the Hungarian Wasteland, which Ady despised and belonged to, depicting the deprivation of Hungarian Plains and its inhabitants with their special beauty. Amrita quotes Ady's poems, which have a tragic or melancholy tone. Ady creates a subject whose primeval force pulled at the same time towards creation and destruction. It is similar to Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionisos in one person.<sup>36</sup> Amrita Sher-Gil's creation of the modern subject is a similar step to Ady's and this places her in the initial phase of modern Indian painting.

Amrita Sher-Gil with a Collection of Endre Ady's Poems

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<sup>35</sup> Éva Karádi, Erzsébet Vezér, *A Vasárnapi Kör, Dokumentumok* [Sunday Circle, Documents] Budapest, Gondolat, 1980, p.7,pp.18-19, p.49.

<sup>36</sup> About Ady see Lóránt Czigány, *A History of Hungarian Literature, From the earliest Times to the mid-1970's* <http://mek.oszk.hu/02000/02042/html/36.html> in Hungarian Katalin Thiel in the journal *Agria* [http://www.agriafolyoirat.hu/index.php?article\\_ID=2023](http://www.agriafolyoirat.hu/index.php?article_ID=2023) accessed on 24.4.2013.



Amrita's enthusiasm for Ady<sup>37</sup> was shared by Indu, to whom she quotes a poem by Ady on the occasion of her birthday: "*És úgy vagyok, hogy sehogyse vagyok*" (*I am in no shape at all*)<sup>38</sup> This is a poem about the passage of life, Nothing and Death, trivialities, which can fill up life and the new beginnings. The poem she writes in Hungarian in 1934 also recalls some of Ady's poetry, specially in the lines:

"But he needs to look down into the depth  
Into the lap of sad, rickety coach driver  
I threw myself and my cowardice  
And I drift through the streets of Pest  
Like a hunted dog"<sup>39</sup>

In a letter in 1934 she writes to her mother about her meetings with Margit Gáspár<sup>40</sup>, a contemporary writer who was encouraging Amrita to write and they discuss the issue of mediocrity. Amrita claims that she is against "mediocre literature" and her two favourite writers, Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938) and Dezső Szabó (1879-1945) cannot be called mediocre. The Sher-Gil's had Karinthy's books, Amrita asked Indu to send her two books by Karinthy *Két hajó* and *Krisztus and Barrabás*.<sup>41</sup> Karinthy had an ironical, rational engagement with the world and took both man's rational and irrational sides into account. She also asks for the novel of Áron Tamási (1897-1966)<sup>42</sup>, *Ábel*, that narrates the education of a poor Transylvanian boy who would like to study, but is employed as a guard in the forest. She was widely read in Hungarian and knew personally many writers, for example Karinthy.

She had a kind of engagement with Hungarian literature that she did not have with French or English. He writes to Karl Khandalavala<sup>43</sup> in 1937 "My passion is modern Hungarian literature

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<sup>37</sup> "I didn't take any books...(not even my bible, Ady)" Vivan Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings*, Tulika Books, 2010, p.515.

<sup>38</sup> Vivan Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings*, Tulika Books, 2010,p.311.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp.129-130. The Hungarian original: Mint aki nagyon –nagyon szédül/De kell hogy lenézzen a mélybe/ Bús, rozzant konflisnak ölébe/ Dobom magam és gyávaságom/És kullogok a pesti utcákon/Úzött kutyaként félve-félve....

<sup>40</sup> Vivan Sundaram, *Amrita Sher-Gil, a self-portrait in letters&writings*, Tulika Books, 2010,pp.125-126.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.p.185.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.637.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.p.401.

and poetry.” Amrita's interests in Verlaine, Baudlaire, Proust and Joyce reflect that she developed the high modernist tastes of the age, but this interest is not as immediate as her engagement with Ady or Karinthy. Her "greater reflection", "more conscious painting", more observation and more stylization in the "sense of nature"<sup>44</sup> that she writes concerning her transition as an artist to Karl Khandalavala justify her interest in the later Ady's poetry and Karinthy's fine, detached prose. Her modernity is based on her material engagement and the situation in India and Ady, Karinthy and Tamási, Hungarian music and literature served her as analogies to create her kind of modernity.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.p.609.