

The Babel Guide to Hungarian Literature in English Translation

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with

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BOULEVARD

natured but naïve. One of the triumphs of the book is her convincingly unpatronising portrayal. Kosztolányi being a poet we expect brilliant descriptions but he also displays a remarkable psychological acuity, verging on, but never crossing over into caricature. The cruelty of the Vizys towards Anna is all the more painful because it is unconscious.

The tragedy occurs when Anna is pressurised to turn down an offer of marriage by a decent workman and is instead seduced by the Vizy's dissolute nephew, Jancsi. She discovers she is pregnant, undergoes a crude abortion, then has to cater for a party at which Jancsi is present and ignores her. It is too much for her. That night she murders the Vizys with a kitchen knife. The only person to speak in her defence is the old doctor, Moviszter. She is given a life sentence.

It is possible to read the book simply as a political allegory but that is to reduce it. In his last proto-postmodernist chapter, Kosztolányi has a pair of men passing his own front gate, discussing the case of Anna. They can't quite decide what political brush Kosztolányi should be tarred with. The prose is clear, rich in imagery but fully harnessed to its dramatic function and the whole is a masterpiece of social psychology at a point of historical crisis. GS

This is Anna, spring cleaning:

There came the day of the great washing. Mountains of grey sheets and blankets, shirts and underwear rose before her, the dirty deathly sweat of the revolution still clinging to them. The steam made her pleasantly light-headed.

She boiled the water in the pan. Her sleeves rolled up, she knelt beside the tub, beating away at the cloth. Her fingers played and puddled sensuously in the warm soapy suds. She lugged great baskets of washing about from place to place, shook the cloth, pleated it, wound it through the mangle. Her tablecloths were soft as lawn, her collars shone like glass.

KOSZTOLÁNYI

Dezso

April Fool [Selected Stories]

Kosztolányi was a prolific writer influenced by psychoanalysis (which had many Hungarian exponents). Like other agile and witty writers he was a short story genius and in this attractive little book the talented Eszter Molnar has both selected and translated nineteen of her favourites. Many of the stories attack reality from inside a child's viewpoint or are about children; they produce a sensation of an uncomfortable clarity — children are often 'innocent' of consideration, empathy or socially-inspired illusions, so theirs can be rather a raw world. Above all though

it is the intensity of these brief stories that catches; whether in the vision of four-year-old Piroška describing the grand tea ceremonies of another era, or the complex servility/aggression of the young protagonist in 'Checkmate', who is obliged to let his sick (and socially superior) playmate win every game of chess against all natural instincts of competitiveness, or the glorious description of the enjoyable, expansive physicality of growing up in summertime in 'Feri'.

Away from the children who dominate many of these stories we meet rather childish, intense, fantasy-prone but likeable adults. Is the 'romantic Hungarian character' being summoned here? The Hungarians appear at least to be a nationality trapped inside some unfortunate and repetitive historical nightmare, but also seem to remain life-affirming in the face of their vicissitudes. Kosztolányi produces a national miniature in the marvellous story 'The Liars', about the classic aristocratic family in reduced circumstances who, consistently and in grandiose team efforts, lie themselves a better and more glorious life. Inevitably reality catches up in the shape of unpaid debts but it was glorious while it lasted. Life was, is lived with élan — and what could be better than that?

Really adult folk, lacking Hungarian élan, on the other hand, can seem obsessive and unstable in Kosztolányi's vision as in the anal-retentives of 'Order' or the village schoolteacher in 'Plaster Angel' who comes to a sticky end. In any case this book is an unmissable English-language window onto one of the greatest writers of his time and place. RK

By the time they arrived the lamps were being lit. It was a cold afternoon, night was falling early. Piroška fitted up the stairs and opened the great glass door. At grandmother's absolutely everything was made of glass. Her eyes took in at a glance the corridor which, stacked with the furniture carried out of the drawing room, awakened a festive excitement, and stared for a long time at the mayonnaise fish, the crab paste, the cakes and the cheeses beneath their strange glass domes, and the squat, dull red rum bottle with the blue sugar-bowl beside it, which at other times stood on the sideboard beside the candlesticks. The change disquieted her a little, but this was so every year on December 2nd, Aurelia's day, for this was her grandmother's name-day. On this day yellow sponge-cakes made with almonds and nuts stood on the white porcelain cake-stands, and slices of pale pink or ruby-red quincejelly, gleaming like glass, and marzipan and fruit-cake. Within doors, the stale and stuffy air was sweetened with rose incense which the servant carried round all the rooms in an incense-burner. In the heat the canary tweeted faintly and languidly in its little cage, and the fur of the stuffed squirrel up on its stand almost caught fire. 7 Afternoon Tea

Skylark (Pacsirta)

Kosztolányi, born in 1855, is one of Hungary's greatest stylists, both as a lyric poet and as a prose writer. His precise language and ironic humour are particularly well suited to the short story, or novella, of which *Skylark*, written in 1923, is one of his best known.

It takes place in September 1899, in an imaginary provincial town called Sárszeg, clearly based on Kosztolányi's birthplace Szabadka, then in southern Hungary. Less than twenty years later it was to become part of the new state of Yugoslavia and be renamed Subotica, so Kosztolányi was writing from the standpoint of a man whose one-time fellow citizens were having to learn Serbian.

In crisp, mostly short sentences, the novel paints an entertaining but also affectionate portrait of life in a small town, with its gossip and its cast of splendid characters: Olivér the atheist, who has been suffering from degenerative syphilis for years; the pimply railway official Géza Cifra; the gloomy theatre director Arácsy; Miklós Ijas, would-be poet and assistant editor of the local paper, with a family tragedy in his past; a trio of actors — the dashing leading man Imre Zányi, the comedian Szolyvay, and the much-gossiped-about Olga Orosz; the alcoholic Latin teacher Szunyogh; and the leading light of local merrymaking Bálint Környey. Kosztolányi's ability to bring these somewhat grotesque characters to life with great economy of means makes it seem entirely appropriate that he should have been the translator into Hungarian of *Alice in Wonderland* — and of Shakespeare.

The action takes place over just one week. An elderly couple, Ákos Vajkay, a retired county archivist and passionate genealogist, and his wife Antónia, find themselves at a loose end when their only child, a very plain thirty-something daughter nicknamed Skylark, unexpectedly takes off for the country to visit relatives. After a great deal of comic fussing over preparations for the journey, her parents see her off at the station and contemplate a bleak interlude without her. But the expected penance of lunch in the local hostelry — Skylark is the cook in the family — turns out to be a thoroughly enjoyable occasion. And gradually the parents come to realise that their reclusive, uneventful existence has been forced on them by poor Skylark's ugliness and the blight her old-maid status has cast on their lives.

The prematurely aged Ákos takes on a new lease of life as he joins in the fun at the Panthers' Table, frequented by the local drinking club of which he was once a member. He relishes the taste of vanilla noodles,

blood-red goulash soup and breast of veal — so different from Skylark's rigorously bland chicken risotto, her pale sponge fingers and her semolina puddings — and for the first time for years indulges in beer, wine, even champagne, and smokes a dark Tisza cigar. Meanwhile his wife enjoys coffee and whipped cream with the ladies of the town. And to celebrate the new brightness that has entered their lives, they even decide to replace the three (out of four) lightbulbs removed for reasons of economy from the dining-room chandelier — and revel in the cosy ambience that results.

The excitement reaches a climax with an invitation to attend a performance of *The Geisha*, which necessitates a long-overdue visit to the barber for Father and the purchase of a splendid crocodile handbag for Mother. The opera is one of the comic highlights of the novel, with the audience idolising the local diva even as they reprove her morals. And the Panthers' Thursday evening 'shindig' sets the seal on Ákos' transformation, as instead of his usual nine o'clock bedtime he finds himself carousing into the early hours, and turns out to be a dab hand at card-playing. On their last day of freedom the couple sleep right through the day, emerging only hours before Skylark's expected return, their exhaustion heightened by a tearful scene in which, Ákos, dead drunk, claims that they don't really love her because she's ugly, a claim that is vehemently denied by his wife. The poignant ending contrasts with the jollities that have gone before, but does perhaps leave the possibility of lasting change open. VMI

The barber gave Ákos the full treatment. He wrapped him in a towel and lathered his face with tepid foam. With the bib around his chest, Ákos looked like a little boy treated to cakes at a patisserie, his face smeared thick with whipped cream.

When his assistant had finished the shaving, the barber set about the old man's hair, shaping it on top with electric clippers, scraping away any leftover stubble behind the ears with an open blade, then trimming, raking, combing and smoothing the sides. He carefully snipped the grey tufts of hair from Ákos' ears and spread his moustache with fine twirling wax. This had just arrived from Tiszaújlak and, at seven kreuzers a tub, possessed the singular property of bonding even the most stubborn of Magyar moustaches. Finally, when he had swept away any remaining strands of fallen hair, he dusted Ákos' temples with a soft brush and pressed his hair into shape with a net.

When net and towel were finally removed, Ákos replaced the copy of *Saucy Simon* in which he had read many mischievous stories from the pen of some amateur scribbler, and looked into the mirror. His face darkened a little.

He hardly recognised himself.

A new man sat on the velvet cushions of the barber's swivel

chair. His hair, although it had just been cut, seemed more bounteous than before. His moustache curled into a sharp and utterly unfamiliar fork, blackened by the Tiszaújlak wax, and as bright and stiff as if hammered from cast iron. His chin, on the other hand, was smooth, fresh and velvety. Every pore seemed younger. But different, too, and this unsettled him. 77-8

KRASZNAHORKAI

László

The Melancholy of Resistance [Az ellenállás melankóliája]

Reader, when you open this book you will be faced with one black molten-lava flow of type that goes on for close on 300 pages in sentences as long as this article is going to be. Do not be put off. You are about to embark on one of the great dark comic novels of our time. The darkness dominates but at the heart of it a kind of ghostly laughter keeps welling up from the deep as though in slow motion. How can I persuade you? Hold your breath for a Krasznahorkaian sentence.

Imagine, then, a world that seems far off and yet is only an accident or two removed from your own, where nothing works, trains disappear, where 'whatever could be imagined might come to pass' so that 'if there were only one door in a building it would refuse to open', and where everyone is expecting an imminent apocalypse of a somewhat bureaucratic kind. In which mood, as you are returning home one night in the figure of Mrs Plauf, a respectable middle-class and somewhat chintzy widow, you pass an enormous truck trundling along at snail's pace, with faded writing on it announcing The Biggest Whale in the World, while at the end of the street strange and troubling crowds are gathering and committing acts of half-concealed violence, though that seems not to bother your dimwit and rejected son, Valuska, who spends his time running through the town delivering papers and staring at the sky in contemplation of the planets, occasionally entertaining the local drunks with re-enactments of solar eclipses, all of which, as you will have realised by now, portend no good because the truck you encountered is carrying not only the vast whale carcass but someone glimpsed only once in the narrative, a tiny birdlike figure called the Prince who has attracted a horde of sinister followers about to rape, pillage and murder at his behest, partly abetted, partly opposed by the equally whale-like and monstrously ambitious apparatchik, Mrs Eszter, whose ex-husband is an Oblomov-like recluse from the music academy of which he was

once head, and from the world at large, so that he might continue his search for the perfect tempering of the clavier that represents the perfect order of the universe, while being tended by the dimwit Valuska even as the mobs riot and the world falls apart.

Take a breath now, but remember this is only an average sentence; in other words some sentences will be even longer than this.

The book is both macrocosm (the planets) and microcosm (the molecules of the amino acids that consume the body), a political parable and a deep chortle at the desperate condition of the human race. Susan Sontag and W.G. Sebald have recognized it as a masterpiece on a level with Gogol. To you it might seem to arise out of a conflict between Henry James and Thomas Bernhard. Be the smartest kid on your block and read it. Here is another taster with mercifully shorter sentences. Valuska is in the Peaseffer pub and has prevailed on various willing but reeling drunks to represent the planets. He begins his discourse: (GS)

'At first, so to speak... we hardly realize the extraordinary events to which we are witness...' he began, rather quietly, and hearing his whisper, everyone immediately stopped speaking in anticipation of the storms of laughter to come. 'The brilliant light of the Sun,' his broad gesture took in the driver, who ground his teeth, struggling against the sea of troubles besetting him, and extended to the hypnotically circling figure of the house-painter, 'floods the Earth with warmth... and light... the side of Earth facing it that is.' He gently steadied the lewdly grinning representation of Earth and turned him to face the Sun, then stepped behind him, leaning on him, almost embracing him, craning over his shoulder, the intense look on his face suggesting that he was merely the medium for the others and blinked at what he termed 'the blinding radiance' of the unsteady driver...

KRÚDY

Gyula

The Adventures of Sindbad [Szindbád három könyve]

Sindbad is an autumnal amorist, a lover of women who, in their turn, adore him because he is the perfect lover. In fact he is so perfect that he is practically immortal. Even death cannot prevent him revisiting his old lovers. In this collection of stories about him he first appears as a child at the time of his first romance which is accompanied by the drowning of an ugly hunchbacked fellow-student of his at the seminary. In the second story he dies, though we are given to understand that he is close on three hundred years old. Throughout the subsequent stories we see him in old age or as a ghost after death engaging with a variety of women, most of whom are already in the autumn of their years. There