# THE OXFORD HISTORY OF HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

From the
Earliest Times to the
Present

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critics consider *The Son of Virgil Timár* (1922) to be Babits's best novel, and not without reason. It is the story of a half-orphaned boy deserted by his father, whose role is assumed by one of his teachers, acting out his suppressed desire for fatherhood. The return of the real father upsets the delicate emotional equilibrium of the main characters, whose conflicting attitudes and instincts Babits presents in a masterly analysis. The subtleties of the plot and the economy of style support Babits's delicate psychological observations. *Castle of Cards* (1923) is a satirical novel in which Babits discloses, within a relatively short span of time (forty-eight hours), a large number of anomalies in the social structure of the fictitious Newtown. With this novel Babits continues the tradition of social criticism which was a salient feature of the Hungarian novel in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

His most ambitious novel is, however, *The Sons of Death* (1927). Using a large canvas and a wealth of autobiographical detail, Babits portrays the decay of the traditional Hungarian middle class, which has neither the vitality of the peasantry, nor the cultural ambitions of the new, largely Jewish, middle class. The novel is the outcome of Babits's compassion for this class whose disintegration is no longer ridiculous, as Mikszáth had seen it, but pathetically tragicomic. In spite of some splendidly drawn figures (e.g. Grandmama Cenci, whose no-nonsense attitudes and unscrupulous pragmatism contrast well with the other characters who, all energy spent, meekly approach their invariable doom) the novel fails to be more than a somewhat rhetorical valedictory speech at the grave of the Hungarian gentry.

Babits never wholly recovered from the dreadful experience of the war years; a sense of gloom permeates not only his lyrics, but his novels as well, even when he turns to the future, as in *Pilot Elsa, or the Perfect Society* (1933). As a novel, *Pilot Elsa* has few commendable qualities. Nevertheless, as a vision of the future it is hardly possible to read it without a chill down the spine. The thesis of the novel is put bluntly in one of Babits's essays: 'In any case it might happen that the proud human race will be a quick and sorry victim of an apocalyptic collective suicide, the arms for which are already being manufactured in the factories of the military industry.' History is a continuous warfare between two camps, one with 'conservatism' as its slogan, and the other with 'progress' on its flags. There is a touch of science fiction in the experiments of the scientist who produces a 'miniature earth', where everything that has taken place on Earth takes place again, except at an accelerated speed. The reader may have the impression that the story unfolding in the novel takes place on this 'miniature earth', or that what we believe to be the real earth is in fact the 'miniature earth'. The novel only proves that Babits could not escape from his gloomy forebodings. As an alternative to the cult of illusion, Babits's grim view of the world offered little hope; his self-chosen isolation in 'the ivory tower' of art did not prevent his sensing the horrors already looming on the horizon.



Babits had always been interested in the literatures of other na regarding the task of translator as his special duty; cultural values shou be locked in the language in which they were created; beauty is uni His expert knowledge of the Classics, and of French, German, E American, and Italian literature is attested not only by his numerous lations, but by his brilliant essays on literature. Of his translations, D *Divina Commedia* (Parts I–III, 1913, 1920, 1923) should be mentioned all; this won him the San Remo Prize awarded by the Italian governn 1940 as the best foreign translation of Dante. In addition to his *Sanctus* (1933), a collection of medieval Latin hymns, *Erato* (Vienna, a book of antique and modern erotic poetry, deserves special atte although his translations from Shakespeare, Goethe, and Sophocles ar remarkable. A by-product of his interest in foreign literature is *A Hist European Literature* (1934), an imposing essay on the great creative of the European civilization. Its title reveals his concept of literature. Babits, European literature and its derivate literatures are universal festations of the human mind; he has no room for the 'exotic' (e.g. Jap or Chinese) literatures, firmly believing that Europe alone represen pinnacle of human civilization. Small wonder, then, that medieval literature, not divided by national aspirations, had special appeal for h

## 2. *Homo aestheticus: Dezső Kosztolányi*

Babits's friend from university years was in many respects similar to h versatile writer and translator, Kosztolányi had Babits's flair for form precision and intuition were prominent features of his artistic crea Writing was a way of life with him: 'I am happy because I write and bec am allowed to write. For ever I sought and found happiness in writing could find it nowhere else.' His obsession with the written word led h believe that to play with words was to play with destiny, for Kosztolány extremely conscious of, and respected, the magic created by the evoc force of the written world. Aesthetics was his religion, he firmly adher the view that in poetry manner is matter.

Born on 29 March 1885 in Szabadka, a large city in Southern Hun and having enjoyed a sheltered existence in the family of the headmas the local *gimnázium*, Kosztolányi left for Budapest University, whic soon abandoned for a career in journalism. He made his literary debu poet (*Within Four Walls*, 1907). Both his early lyrics and prose revea youthful dandyism; he seemed to enjoy being a poseur and playe self-assumed role with elegance and lightness; but at the same time, this served as a fence against the brutality of the outside world. The poems o first volume were already flawless, although they often displayed the ea ness of a young poet. The general tone of his verse alternated betw lightness and gloom. His childhood experiences were almost exclusivel

source of his inspiration; his melancholic broodings over the passing of youth, however, created the occasional masterpiece ('The Trees of Üllői Street'). Nevertheless, even the early poems contained traces of an irrational and vague uneasiness, an awareness of death which in his fecund imagination later became almost an obsession with necrophobia.

The elegiac treatment of his childhood recollections is continued in his second volume (*Complaints of a Poor Little Child*, 1910). Kosztolányi captures the moods of childhood with a sure touch; tiny pleasures, disappointments, affectionate attachments or wounding maladjustments are all convincingly recorded, people whom he knew personally—the family doctor, his father playing chess, or schoolfriends are all portrayed in delicate sketches—but again, in the course of the volume, he conjures up death; the poet relives his past with the sudden vividness of 'The Man Who Has Fallen Under The Train'. His playful treatment of childhood daydreams is innocent and often subtle ('I Dream About Many-Coloured Inks'), yet occasional allusions to nursery rhymes ('Twine, Twine, Intertwine') can grow into petrified expressions of unaccountable bewilderment, fear, and terror which dwell in the subconscious of every adult. The cult of an uncanny fear of night, darkness, and death is partly a sincere expression of Kosztolányi's own innermost feelings, but might also have been a direct result of his interest in psychoanalysis and his friendship with Sándor Ferenczi, the talented disciple of Freud (cf. Chapter XVI p. 266).

His subsequent volumes display his mature style, his love of intricate poetic devices and occasional erotic allusions, his constant wrestling with the puzzling transience of human life, and above all, a recognition of man's hopelessness in the pursuit of happiness. This last motif is best expounded in 'Happy, Sad Song' (*Bread and Wine*, 1920), a poem of exquisite lyrical beauty and construction. Kosztolányi never participated in politics, nor had he any desire to be a committed poet, but the events of 1919 shocked him deeply and he wrote a number of poems expressing his abhorrence of upheavals ('A Cry by Hungarian Poets to the Poets of Europe'). He had a personal loss: Szabadka, his hometown, was ceded to the newly-created state of Yugoslavia, and he could no longer freely visit his birthplace, which constantly haunted his memory.

His volumes published in the inter-war period (*Laments of a Sorrowful Man*, 1924; *Naked*, 1928; and *Reckoning*, 1935) show that pure art and human compassion are not incompatible. The volumes contained no new themes: Kosztolányi, like Babits, wrote no genuine love poetry, and nature played a negligible part in his imagery. He tried his hand at new poetic forms, including free verse; a good example of this almost expressionistic throbbing of words is to be found in 'Flag'. He still loved iambics and rich rhyme-schemes (as testified by many fragments built from unexpected rhymes), he produced virtuoso forms based on the tonality of the vowels



('Ilona'), but behind the ornamental edifice of technique, texture atmosphere, there are almost always intense emotional undercurrents is a recurrent motive, the grief over the transitoriness of human exis 'Funeral Sermon', which starts off as an allusion to the first known Hun poem (cf. Chapter I pp. 16–7) is broadened into an expression irreparable loss felt for the unrepeatable uniqueness of each human and claims that even the average man has something, a feature or a ma ism, that no one else will ever possess.

His poetry also reveals a lack of religious feeling and/or exper Kosztolányi's basic attitude to life is that of a non-believer:

> I believe in nothing,
> If I die, I shall be nothing
> Even as before I was born
> Upon this sunlit earth. Monstrous!
> Soon I shall call you for the last time,
> Be my good mother, O eternal darkness!*
>
> ('Last Cry')

Critics have often accused Kosztolányi of poetic lamentations, and ingly they were right, for grief is indeed his main theme; yet he under the principle of restraint as very few poets have ever done. He knev man cannot find consolation in platitudes even if they are disguised as principles. Once in a rare moment of inspiration he experienced the me of existence, and the totality of this experience made him aware eternal harmony between mind and matter, which, in that mome illumination, human reason could do nothing to destroy:

> Look, I know there is nothing for me to believe in,
> and I also know that I have to depart from here,
> yet I had stretched my breaking heart to be a string
> then I started to sing to the azure,
> to the one whom nobody knows where to find,
> to the one whom I don't find either now or when dead.
> But indeed, today, as my muscles get softer,
> I have a feeling, my friend, that in the dust
> where I was stumbling over clods of earth and souls
> I was the guest of a grand and unknown Lord.
>
> ('Daybreak Drunkenness')

In one of his last, posthumously-published poems, 'Piety in Septer Kosztolányi's neurotic fears of the unknown and his restless searc certainty finally ceased, giving way to an overwhelming desire to dr unwilling world into his heart with pagan piety and feverish greed victory of faith in a poet whose lifelong struggle with the diabolical ch

* Translated by Watson Kirkconnell.

human existence ultimately brought him inner peace, ecstasy, and perhaps Christian humility. This magnificent poem is a fitting conclusion to a poetic career whose inspiration never lacked profundity or insight into the essence of existence.

While Babits was definitely a better poet than he was a prose-writer, it is arguable whether Kosztolányi's poetry or his fiction was his more significant contribution to literature. Of his novels, perhaps *The Bloody Poet* (1922) is the most remarkable. Its hero is Nero—not the tyrant, but the dilettante poet who lived by flattery, lacking any self-knowledge; a sure sign of dilettantism. *The Bloody Poet* is not a historical novel in the ordinary sense; Kosztolányi is preoccupied with frustration and the psychological factors responsible for it. Both Nero and the other characters are drawn with masterly skill and, at the same time, indicate Kosztolányi's fundamental approach to human existence—only pity can lighten the burden of living. Nero, with his childish vanity and his reckless jealousy of the superior poetical ability of his half-brother, is a pitiful creature who has always lacked true human relationships. Thomas Mann, who read the manuscript, claimed in the preface to the German edition of the novel that Kosztolányi's work 'affects our senses with a humanity that is so true that it hurts'.

His next novel, *Skylark* (1924), is rather a long short story in which Kosztolányi continues the tradition of exploring the blind alleys of small-town existence with its looming boredom. The simple plot concerns the departure on a summer holiday of the unmarried daughter of middle-class, ageing parents. Her absence relieves them of the burden of the daily routine; their sense of duty suddenly vanishes when they discover that they hate their only child. When she returns, monotonous duty also returns to their lives, and affections become tedious responsibility once more. In spite of the slightness of its plot, the novel is kept alive by Kosztolányi's inside knowledge of small-town pettiness, his economy of construction, and his sympathetic character-drawing. The same is true of *Golden Dragon* (1925), another small-town story—this time about the tragedy of a high school teacher who is persecuted until his death—with the moral, so characteristic of Kosztolányi's philosophy, that crime is not always followed by punishment, and that honesty is an inadequate protection against the unscrupulous machinations of those who possess power in society.

*Wonder Maid* (1926) is the story of a servant girl, Anna Édes, whose respect for and devotion to her mistress are unquestionable; yet inexplicably, tension grows in their relationship, and she brutally murders her employers. It is a masterly presentation of accumulated repression in a simple, innocent country girl. In a sense, it is in *Wonder Maid* that Kosztolányi, besides showing his fascination with psychological problems, assumes social responsibility, pointing out that the lower classes should also be treated as human beings by their superiors. In addition, Kosztolányi metes out poetic



justice; the maid's death sentence is commuted to life imprisonment, tha to her passionate defence by a physician, who blames her mistress for tragedy. The courage of Dr Moviszter to speak up is obviously strengthe by the social conscience of the writer who, in spite of his unwillingnes reveal his emotional commitment to moral values, is always on the sid the meek.

Kosztolányi was a prolific short story writer, or rather he wrote a gı number of short pieces, including sketches, essays, and lyrical reminiscen which were all part of his journalistic activity—feature articles in *Pest N* and other quality papers. Of his short stories, the *Kornél Esti* stories (19 are the best, and it is in these stories that Kosztolányi's keen sense of hum finds an outlet, but their subtlety extends far beyond their humour (ı 'Freshers', or 'The Bulgarian Conductor'). Esti is the alter ego of Kosztolá and a symbol of forbidden thoughts and feelings to which the moral se objects,—he represents the hidden desires of the ego, in a sense he is embodiment of all those human impulses: senseless revolts, irresponsibil or latent cruelty—the existence of which everybody is reluctant to adr yet, at the same time, Esti is also Kosztolányi's better self; he revolts agai hypocrisy: 'It was he who compelled me to champion the cause of all th people who are rejected, imprisoned or hanged with the consent of majority of society.' Esti does not believe in world-saving ideas, he knc that truth is relative, and that heroic actions can be ridiculous; he reali that man can only experience tiny segments of life, and that humanitar intentions manifest themselves best in small deeds.

Kosztolányi was also a prolific translator. Translating the best of otl literatures was a particular aspiration of the writers of the *Nyugat* generati they established and maintained a highly individual attitude to fore literature. They absorbed both the message and the style-ideals of fore writers, who, in translation, became part of the Hungarian literary herit to an extent unprecedented in earlier times. True, this intensive attention foreign works did not preclude leaving the translators' artistic hallmarks each translation; no great creative artist can discard his own personal when translating, as is particularly clear with Babits, Kosztolányi, a Árpád Tóth. Of Kosztolányi's translations, the following should be m tioned: *Modern Poets* (3 volumes, 1914), *Romeo and Juliet* (1930), a *Chinese and Japanese Poems* (1931).

### 3. *A Poet of Loneliness: Gyula Juhász*

The third member of the outstanding triad at Professor Négyesy's* semir in the University of Budapest, Gyula Juhász, was the odd man out amo them, not only in temperament and personality but also in the developme

* L. Négyesy (1861–1933) was a noted teacher of aesthetics.