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From the
Earliest Times to the
Present

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Babits had always been interested in the literatures of other nations, and his role as a translator, his prolific writing, and his critical approach to literature are evident throughout his works. Babits's best novel, The Son of Death (1927), is a psychological study of a character who, through his own experiences and those of others, seeks to find meaning in the world. Babits's understanding of the human condition is reflected in his characters, who are often depicted as flawed and flawed in their pursuit of truth and understanding.

Babits's works often deal with the themes of love, death, and the human condition. His ability to explore these themes in a way that is both personal and universal is what sets him apart as a writer. Babits's work is not only a reflection of his own experiences but also a commentary on the human condition. Babits's use of symbolism and metaphor allows him to explore these themes in a way that is both powerful and thought-provoking.

Babits's work has had a significant impact on Hungarian culture, and his legacy continues to be felt today. His novel, The Son of Death, has been translated into several languages and continues to be read by readers around the world. Babits's work is a testament to his commitment to exploring the human condition and his ability to do so in a way that is both compelling and insightful.
source of his inspiration; his melancholic broodings over the passing of youth, however, created the occasional masterpiece (‘The Trees of Útöi Street’). Nevertheless, even the early poems contained traces of an irrational and vague uneasiness, an awareness of death which in his uncud 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-Colouredinks’), 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: Szabadska, 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

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(‘Ilona’), but behind the ornamental edifice of technique, texture and atmosphere, there are always almost intense emotional undercurrents is a recurrent motive, the grief over the transitoriness of human exist ‘Funeral Sermon’, which starts off as an allusion to the first known Hungarian poem (cf. Chapter I pp. 16–7) is broadened into an expression of irreparable loss felt for the unrepeatable uniqueness of each human and claims that even the average man has something, a feature or a madness, 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 knew 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 of eternal harmony between mind and matter, which, in that mone 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 cloths 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 Septem 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 chi

* 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 affection becomes 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, that to her passionate defence by a physician, who blames her mistress for tragedy. The courage of Dr Moviszter to speak up is obviously strengthened by the social conscience of the writer who, in spite of his unwillingness to reveal his emotional commitment to moral values, is always on the side of the meek.

Kosztolányi was a prolific short story writer, or rather he wrote a great number of short pieces, including sketches, essays, and lyrical reminiscences, which were all part of his journalistic activity—feature articles in Pest Nép and other quality papers. Of his short stories, the Kornél Esti stories (15 are the best, and it is in these stories that Kosztolányi’s keen sense of humankind finds an outlet, but their subtlety extends far beyond their humour (‘Freshers’, or ‘The Bulgarian Conductor’). Esti is the alter ego of Kosztolányi and a symbol of forbidden thoughts and feelings to which the moral self objectifies—he represents the hidden desires of the ego, in a sense he is an embodiment of all those human impulses: senseless revolts, irresponsibility or latent cruelty—the existence of which everybody is reluctant to admit, yet, at the same time, Esti is also Kosztolányi’s better self; he revolts against hypocrisy: ‘I was he who compelled me to champion the cause of all those people who are rejected, imprisoned or hanged with the consent of majority of society.’ Esti does not believe in world-saving ideas, he knows that truth is relative, and that heroic actions can be ridiculous; he realises that man can only experience tiny segments of life, and that humanitarian intentions manifest themselves best in small deeds.

Kosztolányi was also a prolific translator. Translating the best of all literatures was a particular aspiration of the writers of the Nyugat generation; they established and maintained a highly individual attitude to foreign literature. They absorbed both the message and the style-ideals of foreign writers, who, in translation, became part of the Hungarian literary heritage. This to an extent unprecedented in earlier times. True, this intensive attention to foreign works did not preclude leaving the translators’ artistic hallmarks each translation; no great creative artist can discard his own personal imprint when translating, as is particularly clear with Babits, Kosztolányi, and Arpád Tóth. Of Kosztolányi’s translations, the following should be mentioned: 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* seminor in the University of Budapest, Gyula Juhász, was the odd man out among them, not only in temperament and personality but also in the development of

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