

## INTRODUCTION

The story of *Anna Édes* is one of innocence exploited. The very name of the heroine means 'sweet', and sweetness is part of her nature. A peasant girl up from the village, who receives employment as a domestic in Budapest, honest, hard-working and simple to the point of simple-mindedness, she is exploited by certain members of the newly recovered middle-classes of 1919 – a selfish and reactionary section of society which had suffered two severe shocks: defeat in the First World War, then a brace of short-lived socialist revolutions. A third great shock, the loss of two-thirds of the country's territory by decree of the Treaty of Trianon, was still to come.

Hungary had entered the war as part of the dual monarchy, her territory extending far into the countries that presently surround her. The various messily distributed nationalities naturally wanted independence, or at least greater autonomy, and as the war progressed they joined the Allies. The defeat of the dual monarchy increased the clamour for full independence. Then, as now, the crumbling of an empire led to a rise in nationalistic feeling. The first revolution in October 1918, known as the Autumn Roses Revolution, established the socialist government of Count Mihály Károlyi, who declared Hungary a republic. But the external pressure was too great. The Romanian army advanced on Hungary and in March Károlyi resigned to be replaced by Béla Kun, a Bolshevik who counted on Russian help. His soviet-style Republic of Councils (which included George Lukács as minor member of the government) instituted a Red Terror, then set about the nationalization of the land that Károlyi had only just begun to distribute to the peasants. By August the experiment was over. The unspeakable had happened and Romanian troops occupied Budapest.

Dezső Kosztolányi, who at the age of thirty-four was a witness to these events, had started to publish very early, when he was only sixteen. The son of a science teacher and occasional author, he was born in 1885 while his father was working in the city of Szabadka in southern Hungary. After school he studied German

in Budapest and Vienna. His reputation was made in 1907 by his first collection of poems, *Within Four Walls*. His second, *The Complaints of a Poor Little Child* (1910), confirmed his standing and enjoyed enormous popularity. Together with the friends he made at university, and who were to remain his literary companions for the rest of his life, he established a new literary journal called *Nyugat* (*Occident*), which quickly became the foremost magazine of its kind in the country. Three generations of Hungarian poets were drawn to it by its high regard for craft and intelligence.

In a generation of elegant stylists, Kosztolányi was the most elegant. Handsome, witty and charming, he proclaimed himself an aesthete and established a career as journalist, commentator and first-rate short-story writer. Baudelaire and Rilke were among those writers he most admired. He was interested in psychoanalysis, made copious translations from various languages and moved with ease through coffee-house society. He also continued to publish a steady stream of poems of which some have established themselves as classics of twentieth-century Hungarian poetry. Though his touch was light – he loved bravura rhyme and was equally at home with free verse – it hinted at darker emotions. There was a nervous but disciplined melancholy at work in him which saved him from mere facility. Having been somewhat traumatized by the First World War and its consequences, he preferred to keep his distance from party political commitment and was sometimes mistrusted as a result. But he inspired enormous affection and loyalty among his friends.

Kosztolányi didn't begin to write novels until 1921 but soon displayed an impressive talent for the genre. His psychological insight was keen, his prose clear and classical. Indeed, there are many who prefer his fiction to his verse. His second novel, *Nero: the Bloody Poet*, which appeared in 1922 (recently republished in English as *The Darker Muses*), won an important literary prize and the enthusiastic approval of Thomas Mann, who wrote an introduction for it. The extended short story that followed this, *Skylark* (1924), is thought by some to be his single finest work. Others however award that honour to his fifth and last novel, *Anna Édes*, published in 1926.

The early elegance is certainly in evidence here, but the book is clearly driven by pity and anger. While it is full of comic, lyrical and psychologically acute vignettes it is considerably more than

the sum of its attractive parts. The story begins with the flight of Béla Kun and the arrival of the unsophisticated Romanian army, and ends before the trauma of Trianon, at which time Kosztolányi's own place of birth disappeared into Yugoslavia. But the book's true interest is not in realpolitik: having established the historical moment Kosztolányi is concerned with the nature of his society rather than its specific fortunes. The ceremonial arrival in Budapest of Admiral Horthy, whose regency was to last until the latter days of the Second World War and who instituted a period of White Terror, is described almost in passing. But the spirit of the time, its cruelty and emptiness, permeate the household in which Anna's personal tragedy unfolds.

Her first appearance is delayed. Kosztolányi makes us see her through her employer, Mrs Vizy's eyes first. She notes that Anna doesn't look like a peasant:

Her nose was not merely 'normal' but of a decidedly interesting shape with wide nostrils: there was something piquant about it. She was slightly taller than average but frailly built, a shade underdeveloped, even a touch boyish. Her lips were pale and chapped. Her hands were as rough as you might expect in a servant, her nails short and square.

This is an owner's view of a prospective possession. Kosztolányi's sense of physical detail is extremely acute and is successfully transferred to his heroine who is terrified by the smell of camphor emanating from the Vizys' piano. This animal response to the unfamiliar smell sets the tone for the whole term of her employment and symbolizes the divide between her and the Vizys, who are substantial characters with complex inner lives but insensitive to the lives of others. They and their friends are part of a social fabric that is already partly fascist in nature. Mrs Vizy looks through people as if she didn't see them and is obsessed with finding the perfect maid. Her husband is climbing the career ladder of the civil service. But Kosztolányi's irony is not restricted to the obvious middle-class targets: it extends to the characters of the caretaker and his wife, as well as the other servants in the story. He is perfectly impartial and highly skilful in delicately shifting the narrative from one subject to another. These voices are then free to betray themselves without too much comment by the author.

The book rises to two climaxes: the eroticism of Anna's seduction by the cold-hearted popinjay Jancsi, a nephew of the Vizys, and the later murders committed by Anna. Anna herself is far from a cypher. Kosztolányi allows her the frail cocoon of innocence while managing to enter her subjectivity with complete conviction. A vulnerable and independent, if enigmatic, figure, Anna ensures that the book does not become merely an argument about social conditions but is raised to genuine tragedy.

Kosztolányi's narrative skill and clear, graphic prose have attracted a series of film makers. Three of his novels have been adapted for the cinema, *Anna Édes* being one of them. One can see why: it is a visual feast, the gallery of characters is appealing to actors, there is satire, romance, sex and murder, and in Dr Moviszter, the old ailing doctor, the reader discovers a protagonist who does try to see that some sort of justice is done. Kosztolányi himself was not at all religious and it is interesting that the doctor, who is, is obviously of an older passing world. Despite severe (and anticipated) criticism from the right, the book restored him to critical favour after a period when this had been slipping away from him.

*Anna Édes* first appeared in England in 1947. By that time Kosztolányi and his closest friends of the first *Nyugat* period were all long and prematurely dead: one by suicide, one through cerebral haemorrhage, one, like Kosztolányi himself, through cancer of the throat. Reputation has been a fickle goddess in twentieth-century Hungary. Although other, more radical writers of the thirties, such as Attila József and Gyula Illyés, rejected both his stance and his manner, by the time of his death in 1936 Kosztolányi's literary reputation appeared secure. After the Communist take-over in 1949, so called 'art-for-art's-sake' aestheticism met with official disapproval and despite the social conscience so clearly evident in his work he was thought to be unsound. The wheel has turned again since then: few people would now query the classic status that is usually accorded him.

His was an ill-fated generation but a remarkably lively and intelligent one. The last great *Nyugat* writer – of the third generation – was Sándor Weöres, who died recently, in 1989. With him the remarkable firework display of early and mid-century Hungarian literature came to a spectacular end. Kosztolányi's work formed a major part of that display. The reader familiar with the world of

Roth, Musil and von Doderer will recognize the place and find it enriched.

Having said that, I have left place names in the original Hungarian on the principle that we tend not to translate such terms from German, French or Italian. *Város* is town or district, *út* and *utca* are street and road respectively, *körút* is ring road, *tér* is square, *hegy* (often used as a suffix) is hill. The two districts which figure largely in the book are both in Buda, close to the river. The Vár or Fortress district was the old administrative centre, containing the royal palace. The *Vérmező* (literally Field of Blood) in the Krisztina district is an open space where the Jacobite rebels of 1795 were executed.

More complex are the old pre-war forms of address which have no direct equivalent in English, such as *nagyságos úr*, or *méltóságos úr* which denote subtle distinctions in civil society. They are generally used by lower ranks in deference to those above them, and are quite precise in their application. I have tried to imply these by tone and manner, and point them up when they are an integral part of the comedy or of some social strategy.

George Szirtes