

## INTRODUCTION

In 1959 the then forty-nine-year-old Hungarian poet István Vas called on T. S. Eliot in the Russell Square offices of Faber and Faber. He had been invited to England by the Foreign Ministry as an outstanding translator of Shakespeare, Thackeray and other English authors—authors to whom he makes reference in the poem entitled “The Translator’s Vote of Thanks”—and he took this opportunity of consulting the poet whose work he was currently translating, and whom he took to be the greatest contemporary poet in the English language, perhaps in the world. The two men had certain things in common: both had worked as clerks in civil life, Eliot in a bank and Vas in the offices of the Standard Company in Budapest, both preferred to avoid ostentation or any poetic mannerism in dress, both had originally appeared in the ranks of the avant-garde, both were classicists who looked to the transforming force of European tradition as their natural source of strength and hoped to integrate this with the experience of modern life in contemporary diction. (Vas, in his autobiography, tells us clearly, though not without some irony, that at the age of twenty he decided to be a conservative poet.)

The interview lasts for about an hour. The cautious Eliot makes small talk but rarely looks directly at his visitor, who tries to turn the discussion to the problems of translating Eliot’s poetry. Eventually Eliot responds, though with some seeming reluctance. The numerous quotations in *The Waste Land* are problems to the translator, Eliot offers his assistance in philological matters. To Vas, Eliot appears nervous and hesitant behind his formal defences—only now and then does he catch a look which he registers as a sign of inner confidence or courage. Vas confesses in a later interview that he never feels quite so Hungarian as when he is abroad, and this visit to England continually leads his thoughts back home (he writes a number of poems about this visit of which “Parliament” is a presently included example). To an English reader the comparison with Eliot will appear without much foundation, subject as he is to the mediation of translators. Indeed the comparison is of limited value. Although there is an element in Vas’s poetry which is readily accessible and definable in Eliotean terms, it will also be

obvious that Hungarian history, landscape and literary tradition play a vital part in his classicising, classical, yet entirely personal verse. Vas's father was a self-made Jewish businessman who had a fine library and could turn out extremely competent occasional verse—at one time he had even written the libretto for an operetta based on *The Rape of the Sabine Women*—but he had a sound bourgeois distrust of artists and bohemians and a taste for the then fashionable *biedermeier* and *secessionist* furniture that proclaimed success within his social circle. The poet's childhood was spent in the darkly voluptuous flats of inner city Budapest where wealth, poverty, prostitution and respectable business met in the compass of a few streets. He read a great deal and was clumsy: his father despaired of him and forbade him to read, which naturally led to him reading in secret and growing to loathe both his father and his tastes. The Vas family may have migrated from Spain at some time in the remote past and included a number of rabbis among its members. In justifying his own more radical departure from family tradition Vas uses his father's abandonment of the rabbinical line—and indeed of the old family name of Weisz—as precedent. As will be obvious by now his father is a far more imposing character in Vas's autobiography than his mother. Although a crude Freudian interpretation of Vas's career would certainly be comically wrong-headed, nevertheless there is interest in seeing how often he has moved into the compass of great authority figures, then quietly but determinedly slid out of them again. "I'm orthodox," he protests in one of his poems, "Theodoric the Great and the Devil", but quickly adds, "when I'm in faith" and the theme of faith, or rather the conflict between faith and obedience, is a recurring one in Vas's poems.

In his last years at school Vas formed part of a youthful literary circle which ran its own magazine and met regularly if informally. At this stage, though he had literary aspirations, his friends considered him to be without talent, except perhaps as a critic, for Vas read both deeply and widely, in German as well as in Hungarian. It is interesting that Vas was the only member of this company whose work was not published in the magazine. Even his best friends deprecated his efforts, and he went through a thoroughly miserable period in which he contemplated suicide. By now he was set upon seeking a course which would break with family and social expectations: having made close friends

with a socialist couple in Austria he became a revolutionary socialist in politics and a conscious modernist in culture.

He had been only eight years old at the time of the communist Republic of Councils which took power in Hungary after defeat in the First World War and which fell within a matter of months. His early teens were spent in the period of reaction, his father's period of success. In terms of literature the major influence was the poet Endre Ady (1877–1919) who had only recently died. Ady had lived in Paris and had absorbed much of the progressive European spirit which has always been part of the lifeblood of Hungarian culture, yet he remained distinctly Hungarian. Expressionism, symbolism, vestiges of the decadence and a revolutionary egotism formed a romantic mixture which exerted a powerful spell over his Hungarian readership. Many of Vas's young friends felt this strength, but at the same time understood it to be part of the past. A still more modern spirit moved among them: the spirit of the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus itself had settled in Dessau in 1926, and naturally it had its Hungarian adherents, the best known of whom was László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), but in terms of literature the most significant figure of the *avant-garde* in Hungary was Lajos Kassák (1887–1967). Having wandered about Europe after the fall of the Republic of Councils Kassák returned to write books, launch magazines, haunt the coffee houses and gather disciples. He was considered a deeply disreputable socialist, albeit a highly puritan one. It was to him that Vas's young contemporaries turned for advice and recognition, and it was he who usually rejected them. In a desperate last throw Vas too brought his poems to Kassák in a coffee house and the great man read through them slowly and deliberately there and then, and to the eighteen-year-old Vas's astonishment, declared, "Sir, you are a poet". After some explanation he added, "Your poems are sincere. There is a man in these poems."

This was the turning point in Vas's life, and Kassák's observation was perceptive: there was and there continued to be a man in Vas's poems, but it was this man that was shortly to rebel, quietly as always but significantly, against the despotic if fatherly Kassák and against his conception of modernism. Kassák was the first to publish Vas. The poem he published then was in the current *avant-garde* mode—a prose poem, fairly routinely describing a household in a pre-revolutionary state, but with

a certain visionary clarity. Prose verse and free verse were approved modes: rhyme and meter were out. Relations between Kassák and Vas were to be complicated by the love affair between Vas and Kassák's step-daughter, Eti. Eti was a dancer, or more accurately an artist in movement somewhat in the manner of Isadora Duncan. She herself was imbued with Kassák's revolutionary spirit and at first rejected the awkward, intellectual, bourgeois Vas's advances. Kassák himself, fiercely jealous of anyone within his sphere of influence, disapproved of the connection, as did Vas's parents from a completely different viewpoint. Nevertheless the affair was under way and continued until Eti's death in September 1939.

For ten years then the couple played a game of hide and seek with their parents, and serious estrangement between the children and their families naturally followed. Intellectually Vas took the first step away from Kassák when he returned to formal verse. He had showed some of the poems he had been writing to a friend, who commented wryly that since some of the lines were practically hexameters Vas should go the whole hog and actually write in these curious old fashioned forms if that really was his desire. He had to explain to Vas what a hexameter was first but Vas took his advice. He had already been infected with the "masculine music" of Catullus, in order to read whom he had refreshed his abandoned schoolboy Latin. Not much later rhyme too appeared in his verse and he had become a fully fledged heretic in Kassák's eyes.

From Kassák then the young man turned to the contemporary masters of verse-craft and in the first place to Dezső Kosztolányi, a poet of the school opposed by Kassák and discounted by Vas himself barely a year before. This school was centred on the magazine *Nyugat* (or "West"), whose chief editor was the poet Mihály Babits. Kosztolányi received Vas at his flat, read his poems and was encouraging. He particularly advised him to make use of the "language of Budapest", something of the *oratio recta* that Vas had already begun to admire in another, quite different, contemporary poet, József Erdélyi, who was associated more with the revival of interest in folk poetry. Kosztolányi also promised to commend Vas's verses to Babits. So Kosztolányi, and then, a little later, Babits became the next major father figures after Kassák. Kosztolányi and Babits were both deeply cultured writers who looked to European tradition

as both a moral and artistic light in their work. Kosztolányi was by this time a virtuoso of rhyme, a witty journalist and a fiercely independent polemicist whose views could in no wise be accommodated by the socialist circles to which Vas still owed his political allegiance. Neither could Babits. Both men were essentially liberals in the Western sense, capable of swinging both left and right, but both of whom, and particularly Babits, were primarily devoted to art rather than politics. Babits was thought to be an ivory-tower writer and despised as such by the politically committed, and it is no coincidence that both he and Kosztolányi were relegated to the literary footnotes after the Second World War, although both are now recognized to have been major writers of the first importance. At this time though they had their spheres of influence, just as other magazines did. The difference was that *Nyugat* was recognized everywhere as a periodical of importance, and even Vas's father was impressed by his son's appearance in its pages, which was certainly not the case with Kassák's magazine.

But by this time Vas's break with his family was almost total. His despairing father had offered to start him off with a new textile factory: Vas had refused and had taken on a lowly job as a clerk with the Standard Works. Although for some time Vas hated this job he grew accustomed to it and later to like it. One of the finest chapters of his autobiography is a description of life at Standard. It is imbued with the unforced poetry of everyday things. The poem "Approaching Fifty" recalls some of the routine of his working life there, and while this was indeed routine it kept him in touch with the lives of ordinary people rather more than a purely literary post would have done. It further encouraged him in the desire to write in simple language of the quality of modern life, to reject the prophetic role often demanded of a Hungarian poet (a role Ady admirably fulfilled), and to be able to articulate thought in verse. As he points out in his autobiography, "I saw no point in writing verse if it did not declare what I was and what had happened to me." And a little later: "However much I admired the modernity of Kassák I found it hard to completely give up the habit of thinking in verse." The ideas of personality, anecdote, prosaic thought, unvarnished truth and classical form had by now given his poetry, if not yet formal or emotional maturity, a clear identity which

became apparent to some of his contemporaries who encouraged him to publish more.

His first volume appeared in 1932, paid for, as were most first volumes then, by subscription. Its title, and by that token the title of its central poem, was the result of one of those fortunate printer's errors. What he intended to read as *Ősi romboldás* ("Ancient" or "Ancestral Destruction") came out as *Ősz romboldás* ("Autumnal Destruction"). He saw the mistake and kept it. The book, much to his surprise, was widely praised in the most glowing terms. These rhymed poems, hexameters and pentameters were perceived as a valid new expression of modern life. The poet had arrived and been accepted. One particular phrase from a review echoed and amplified what Kassák had said three years before. "The author of these verses is a true human being and a true poet."

It is true that in Vas the man and the poet are indivisible. There are many specific autobiographical references in the poems, but these are always part of an intellectual, moral and emotional discourse which is in itself a process of discovery. Since Vas's early development as a poet has been broadly described above, and because the mature poet is now on the threshold of autonomy, it remains to fill in a few important gaps, and to point out a few useful guidelines to the reading of individual verses.

One of the first contemporaries whom Vas admired was the young Gyula Illyés, who also started with the avant-garde, then a little like Vas, returned to traditional form. Illyés was the most vigorous and influential of the younger poets and Vas was to learn a great deal from him (later Vas was not without influence on Illyés). In mentioning Illyés's name one comes up against the main polarity in twentieth-century Hungarian verse, one that still stirs passions and creates ill feeling. Hungary was, and to a great extent still is, an agricultural country, and the state of the peasantry in the thirties was giving rise to serious concern. Illyés himself was of peasant stock and wrote a famous book on conditions in an impoverished Hungarian village, *People of the Puszta*. A whole generation grew up with Illyés and looked to the life and traditions of the land as a source of inspiration, a land that was felt to be in some sense deeply and peculiarly indigenous. The verse they wrote could not be described in any direct sense as patriotic (though some of this quality was attached to it

later) but it had certain formal qualities and certain resonances that could most clearly be defined by reference to its apparent complementary, the verse of the cultivated western Europe-orientated metropolis. Vas ought to be easily pigeon-holed as a metropolitan, especially as to some extent the terms metropolitan, cosmopolitan and Jew became synonymous, but time and again he slips through our fingers, just as he slipped through the fingers of his father, of Kassák and, in 1938, of his religion too. In that year he was converted to Roman Catholicism and was married to Eti with the church's blessing. The marriage was not fated to last for long. Within a year Vas had lost his job at Standard because of anti-Jewish laws, and shortly after Eti died of a brain tumour. Although Eti herself was never a conforming believer Vas attributes his sense of belief to her ("The Invisible Element" is addressed to Eti but widens, as Vas's poems almost always do, to question the nature of their political beliefs). The later poems too, based on incidents from the Bible, spring out of the desire to keep faith with his understanding of the nature of belief.

It is one of the central paradoxes of Vas's life that he is both a rebel and a conformist, that while keeping clear of binding external commitments he is deeply concerned with the idea of keeping faith. One of his most important poems is in fact called "Rhapsody: Keeping Faith" which is addressed to his dead friend Miklós Radnóti. Radnóti's name will be relatively familiar to an English reader since a number of collections of his poems have appeared in translation on both sides of the Atlantic. Radnóti and Vas did not like each other immediately but eventually became firm friends. Poetically too they were close to each other: both used the hexameter and Radnóti was an even more classically orientated poet than Vas. By an irony of fate the doctor that saved Vas from likely death in a forced labour camp missed saving Radnóti by a few minutes. Radnóti, like Vas, was Jewish by birth not by conviction, and he too was broadly speaking a socialist. Vas's poem views this socialism from the perspective of the Hungary of the fifties and while declaring his aversion from any direct choice between opposites, ends with one of his few mystical gestures:

You, pastor of kept faith, accept me at the gate  
Where those things are made whole that now disintegrate,  
Where Either/Ors, those tyrants, may not gain passage through,  
Where I'll discover all I owe allegiance to,  
That those once rent asunder may never be undone,  
Be, all transforming Love, a thousand shapes in one.

This is not primarily the mysticism of the visionary, but of the rational human being, and it is this down-to-earth quality that attracts Vas to that apparently most mystical of saints. Teresa of Avila, whose Admonitions yield the subject of one of his finest poems, and whom, as one of the church's most paradoxical figures, he vows as his patron saint.

Although devastated by Eti's death, within a week Vas found another job with the help of his friends and here began a double love affair that was to last through the war. At his new place of work, the Giraud Canned Food Factory, he met a young fellow employee, Maria Kutna. At the same time he fell in love with the painter Piroska Szántó, the poet's present wife of thirty-seven years. She rejected him at this point, the war separated them and Vas grew closer to Maria. The war begins to overshadow everything. At first Vas's Catholicism saves him from harassment, but soon he loses the job and is forced to find safe accommodation in various parts of Budapest. Being unemployed, during the day he is condemned to a nomadic existence in the more expensive coffee houses where he hopes to avoid attention. Eventually he too is called in to forced labour and under the stress attempts suicide by taking an overdose. By this method he gains a brief exemption, then is called in once more but Maria (with the aid of the aforementioned doctor) saves him. In the darkest days of the war he is generously given shelter by a fellow writer, Géza Ottlik, who harbours him at grave personal risk. At the end of the war he marries Maria, but almost immediately takes up connections with Piroska, and eventually he leaves Maria for her.

There are a number of poems concerning the war. "An Evening at 'The Four Greys'" (the four greys meaning four horses, but in this case the name of a public house in Buda) recounts a meeting with Piroska in 1942 against the background of the first bombing raid on the city. In "Boccherini's Tomb" Vas describes the school in Budapest where he and his fellow

Jews were kept, and where he attempted suicide. "The Grand Finale" is set in the last days of the war. All these pit the values of the intellect against the panic and inhumanity of violence.

When the war ended Vas appeared a somewhat tangential figure in the great general reorganization but eventually settled in at a publisher's office and received a grant to travel to Italy in 1947, a journey marked in this collection by three poems, "San Marco", "The Grave of Nicholas Cusanus" and "Roman Moment". Soon the cloud of Stalinism was to settle over Hungary and blot out, at least temporarily, some of its best literary talent. The cosmopolitan or "urban" school of writing was to disappear from public view and the land-based or "popular" school (or that element of it which was thought to be manipulable) was to gain the upper hand, along with a great deal of worthless ideological doggerel. Vas was in fact asked on one occasion to produce a poem that could be used to attack the church but turned the offer down. In the event he too was unable to publish his work and so, like many of the others, earned his living by translation. One of the unintentional by-products of enforced silence was a crop of outstanding translations by various writers and as well as translating Vas continued to write introductions to translations, a number of which certainly ran the risk of censorship or something more serious. Some of the poems he then wrote about the period are only just beginning to appear in magazines. In the present volume we can really only refer to "Romanus Sum" and to a lesser extent to "Theodoric the Great and the Devil", though, as mentioned above, "Rhapsody: Keeping Faith" confronts the issue on a direct personal level. There is another poem which does belong to this period although it might appear to commemorate the end of the war. "Pest Elegy", one of his most passionate poems, refers in fact to the revolution of 1956, which was also the year when his own silence was broken with a partly censored volume of selected and new poems.

"Pest Elegy" is one of the key poems in this collection. It apostrophizes the city to which Vas feels emotionally bound: keeping faith with it is as important as keeping faith with an idea or a person, for the city is all of these things together. Vas's poetry returns time and again to concrete images of the town and its population. In "Ode to Yesterday's Women" and "Approaching Fifty" it is the living backdrop; in "Through Time's

Segments" and "Moving" it is a residue of interiors; it is seen in passing in "Saint Médard". The city is community and history, the emblem of the resilient intellect. Nature is the brief beautiful chaos against which order appears in its heroic clarity. The intellect is a necessary part of the godhead for Vas. "Ode to the Intellect" states this credo most forthrightly, but it is implicit in "Rhapsody in an Autumn Garden", "October Night in the Garden" and "Idling" among other poems.

Nature is the elegiac emblem of mortality. This is especially so in the poems about old age and love. The sensuality of "On a Drawing" and "Just This" gain their power from the sense of shadows closing in, as do his wife, Piroska Szántó's late erotic paintings. The drawing in the poem is clearly one of hers. The late poems have a remarkable delicacy and transparency closer to pure poetry than anything in his previous work, and the contemplation "Beethoven's Old Age" bridging the intellectualism of his mature mode with the tremulous sensuousness of this late work, is probably one of his greatest individual poems.

Yet there will be some people who will question Vas's *œuvre*, and wonder whether such a thinking, speaking kind of verse can be considered to be great poetry at all, whether there isn't something essentially prosaic in the whole process. Vas himself has a revealing observation in his autobiography: when discussing the work of the nineteenth-century poet, János Arany, whom he considers more truly his ancestor than the physical father whom he rejected, he notes in passing that it is precisely the odd prosaic word dropped artfully here and there that raises Arany's poetry to the heights. What he admires in Eliot is what he admires in the seventeenth-century English poets too: discourse, intellect, sensuality, irony. And in the eighteenth century perhaps the beginnings of sentiment too. The English reader will notice that the romantic, suffering first person singular survives in Vas, without the masks we take for granted. That it does not become embarrassing or egotistical is due to the fact that Vas naturally assumes that the "I" of the poem is addressing a reader who is ready to share, and to some extent *has* shared his experience, and who will therefore find the formal expression or interpretation of it welcome. It is, in other words, perfectly natural.

Of course, in the English language we observe English

precedent, but in Vas's case we are fortunate in that his diction, his thought, even his feelings are recognizable to us in our own tradition. We have already mentioned the eighteenth century, but we might add the Years of the public poems and perhaps even certain tones in MacNeice. We should not forget that Vas has translated from other languages beside English, and that he is also the Hungarian interpreter of another anecdotal poet, Cavafy. And just as Cavafy seems to have found a room prepared for him in the English language so Vas too, in some sense, seems to pre-exist in it, to a greater extent than certain poets whom native Hungarians would consider to be of superior intensity or range—Sándor Weöres springs to mind. Vas gives the translator room and allows him to develop the verse at a natural pace. While a precise rendition of his classical measures is probably out of the question the classical, almost Horatian quality of his lines readily offers itself in English.

In the late eighties of the twentieth century we may notice a more discursive, more autobiographical, almost a more epic quality in the poetry of the English language. In Walcott, in Murray, in Dunn (and if we stretch a point, in Brodsky) we have become accustomed to the play of intellect, to a preoccupation with place and past, and importantly a desire to synthesize individual experience with broadly European culture. This is what we call classicism. Vas's language is more open and limpid than any of these. The sneaking sense that all is not inevitable, that all is not solid ore may nevertheless linger, especially if we expect all major poetry to be a seamless web of lyric verse. But this is a by-product of Vas's human approach. He has never been afraid of personality: that is why his verse is personable, and why, though comparisons may be made with Eliot, he works at a lower pressure. Eliot's brief anecdotes are sharper and more fragmented, more buried in the text. Vas's anecdotes assume our patience to listen. His is an approachable human voice talking to fellow human beings. To do Vas justice we must read him in bulk.

Vas's early critics were right to see a man in the poems, and it is characteristic of the man to maintain his independence and autonomy, quietly, without fuss, but with absolute determination. He was not his father's man, nor Kassák's, nor Kosztolányi's, nor the church's, nor the party's. To have maintained such a system of survival will seem like betrayal to the fanatic

but it is in fact evidence of courage and faith. To be autonomous is to be lonely and exposed. Through Vas the man we discover a human history, a temperament and a moral world that lead us back to the poems, which, seen through the lens of Vas's humanity, will then appear bigger, more inevitable than at first we might have thought.

*George Szirtes*