

Kosztolányi, Dezső. *Inebriate of Dawn: Selected poems*. Translated by John M. Ridland and Peter V. Czipott. Budapest and Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and L'Harmattan Publishing, 2025. 168 pp.

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This selection of Dezső Kosztolányi's verse in English offers an important insight into early 20th-century Hungarian lyrical poetry. For the Hungarian reader, poetry has been a question of national pride and self-awareness for at least two hundred years, and, indeed, it is not unduly so: Sándor Weöres, arguably the best Hungarian poet of the second half of the 20th century, was a likely candidate to be offered the Nobel Prize on at least three occasions between 1965 and 1981. The reasons behind the failure to secure the Nobel Prize for Weöres will probably never be truly known, but readers and poets generally agree that Hungarian lyrical writing deserves a wider acknowledgment.

Hungary, like many other communist countries, emerged from general obscurity after the collapse of the regime, when Eastern bloc countries gained separate visibility after the blurring effect of the Iron Curtain, which obscured cultural and historical specificities. The newly emerging cultural self-assertion brought about the publication of historical anthologies of poetry such as *The Lost Rider* (Budapest, Corvina, 1997, edited by a group of poets and scholars), *The Colonnade of Teeth* (London, Bloodaxe, 1996, edited by the doyen of Hungarian literature abroad George Gömöri), or the encyclopaedic historical anthology *In Quest of the Miracle Stag* (Chicago, Atlantis-Centaur, 1996-2000, edited by Adam Makkai), whose two volumes over 2,000 pages offer an overview of Hungarian poetry from 'The Lament of Mary' / 'Ómagyar Mária-siralom' to contemporaries like the work of Mónika Mesterházi. Some individual poets had seen their work appear in translation already in the 1970s when a couple of exceptional Anglophone poets tried their hand with Hungarian poetry: Ted Hughes's rendering of János Pilinszky (*Selected poems*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1976), and the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan's translation of Sándor Weöres and Attila József offered apt translations of Hungarian verse (*Eternal moment* London, Anvil Press, 1988). From 1990 onwards, interest focused on contemporary poets who appeared infinitely more fashionable or deemed to be more appealing to the international reader. Nevertheless, there are

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few notable exceptions to their dominance: the entire poetry of the holocaust victim Miklós Radnóti is now available in English due to the unwavering commitment of Fred Turner and Zsuzsanna Ozsvath, and the centenary of the other stellar poet Attila József in 2005 saw new translations commissioned, helped by the other émigré man of letters Thomas Kabdebó. Collaboration between Hungarian émigré scholars and Anglophone poets, has, as shown, a long tradition in such poetic transmissions, and their role in giving Hungarian literature international visibility cannot be overestimated.

The selected poems of Dezső Kosztolányi add another individual poet-focused volume to those addressing the early 20th century period; an era that is generally considered to be the most aesthetically productive and emotionally rewarding period of Hungarian lyrical poetry. Kosztolányi enjoyed a stellar career in Hungary during the first four decades of the 20th century, producing novels, short stories, poetic translations and poetry in his relatively short life. His novels, *Anna Édes* (1993, translated by George Szirtes) and *Pacsirta/Skylark* (1993, translated by Richard Aczel) are relatively well known amongst English-language readers, yet no volume-length anthology of his verse had been published before. The present volume is the product of a long-standing collaboration between John Ridland (1933–2020), professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Peter Czipott, a retired physicist of Hungarian heritage based in California. Ridland had already established his reputation as a translator of 19th-century Hungarian verse by rendering Petőfi's national classic long poem *János vitéz/John the Valiant* into English (1999). Czipott's most important contribution to the reception of Hungarian literature is his rendering of Antal Szerb's *Journey by Moonlight /Utas és holdvilág* (2016). Ridland and Czipott had also collaborated on translations of Sándor Márai and Miklós Radnóti.

Inebriate of Dawn aspires to give due credit to Kosztolányi, whose flair for form, matched with precision and intuition, makes his ostensibly transparent poems surprisingly taxing to translate. The selection aims to present Kosztolányi throughout his career, though with an emphasis pronouncedly different from the readers' consensus in Hungary. Kosztolányi's standing in the Hungarian literary consciousness is unquestionable: his poetry is a mandatory topic in secondary school leaving exams; his work is studied as that of the *homo aestheticus*, the deliberately apolitical aesthete, who consciously rejects the calls for taking explicit moral or political positions. Literary criticism gives equal importance to Kosztolányi's early volume *Complaints of the Poor Little Child* (1910), which uses the persona of a child to register encounters between a growing intellect and the wider world, describing colorful inks and visions of death that correspond to the age of metaphysical fear. An equal emphasis is placed on the work of the mature Kosztolányi, reflecting the existential anxiety of a successful, widely acknowledged writer, whose national reputation and solid bourgeois existence offer no protection from middle-aged angst. The parallel emphasis on the young and mature Kosztolányi was already reconsidered by the editors of *The Lost Rider* (1997), which carries only poetry from the post-1920 volumes, all in the translation of George Szirtes. The major comprehensive historical anthology *In Quest of the Miracle Stag* includes

twenty-six poems, with the great majority translated by another excellent translator Peter Zollman, whose commitment to literature emerged after a long and productive career in science and engineering. Zollman, in an enterprising spirit, also tried his hand at *Poor Little Child* poems, which he rendered into English with much courage and sensitivity.

The volume produced by Ridland and Czipott follows the tradition of focusing predominantly on Kosztolányi's mature poetry, dealing with existential angst and mortality and the metaphysics of beauty. A 'Preface,' written by the Hungarian literary scholar Csaba Horváth, strives to contextualize Hungarian poetry for the American reader, reiterating somewhat traditional notions about the language's isolation and its potential for poetic expression, followed by reflections on Kosztolányi's art. Ridland and Czipott's 'Introduction' also offers a historicizing contextualization of the language and the poet through a biographical lens. The most important section is a long reflection on translators' poetic credo, explaining the challenges posed by the different (English vs. Hungarian) poetic traditions regarding the use and potential of rhyme – an aspect indispensable for translating a poet with a singular sense of form. Their credo was to keep the original rhyme form. Kosztolányi, as they argue, used irony 'not to be confused with frivolousness:' the lightness that conceals depth.

Responding to the irony that the Anglophone reader has little access to Kosztolányi's verse despite its deep roots in Hungarian consciousness, the volume offers a representative selection. For a start, one poem is taken from his 'Juvenilia' and another one from *Within Four Walls*. His breakthrough collection *Complaints of a poor little child* (1910) is only represented by four poems, while the decade of the 1910s, during which six volumes were published, remains uncovered. The mature Kosztolányi is represented by the volumes *Complaints of the Mournful Man*, *Naked*, and *Uprorious Nature*. The final volume, *Summing Up*, is translated in its entirety apart from 'Ilona,' a poem based on a melodic play with the phonetic structure of Hungarian, which all translators bar one have found forbidding. As a general tendency, foreignization dominates,

though the title *Inebriate of Dawn* is a reference to Emily Dickinson in a bid to relate the work to American poetry; the choices made for proper names and other local references are kept preserving referentiality to the original. Foreignization as a poetic strategy is also discernible in the tendency to follow the rhyme scheme and to respect the meter and form of the original. For this commitment and for the excellent selection, the volume deserves nothing but praise.

Ridland and Czipott's volume therefore offers an important addition to transnational knowledge about Hungarian lyrical poetry. Giving credit to one of the most outstanding early 20th-century poets in itself is an act of courage and of artistic integrity, and it is only hoped that, now that Kosztolányi's work is available in the rendition of different poets, connoisseurs of 20th-century European poetry and scholars of translation studies will be equally interested in making further explorations into his work. For this journey, Ridland and Czipott's volume offers indispensable help.