

GYULA KRÚDY AND *SZINDBÁD*

FERENC TAKÁCS

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
Hungary

Gyula Krúdy (1878–1933) produced the main bulk of his fictional work in the period 1897–1920, when Modernist writing in Hungary was initially dominated by the short story as the medium of experiment and innovation. The basic form of his prodigious output was, similarly to a number of other important prose authors of the period, the short story. His highly influential work has an elusive quality: it is unclassifiable, and general critical labels such as Symbolism, Impressionism and Surrealism have been of partial and dubious help in discussions of his writing. Approached from a technical point of view, the underlying narrative strategy of Krúdy's work can be identified as serial accumulation, with its attendant openness of form: the short-story sequence, the story-tagged-on-the-previous-story organisation of his novels, the historically pre-novelistic frame-tale-like coordination of various narrative forms. This is particularly evident in the case of *Szindbád*, Krúdy's crowning achievement in fiction, which came into being as an ever expanding series of short stories, novels and "dreams", held together by their protagonist, the symbolically reimagined figure of Sindbad the Sailor, the mythic wanderer of *The Arabian Nights*. Infused with the lyricism of conjugal Eros and Thanatos, the stories develop, and give variations on, the central character as a composite symbol, the manifold meanings of which range from authorial self-dramatisation to a philosophical vision of Man as metaphysical superfluity.

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Early modern Hungarian fiction was predominantly *short fiction*. Whether these writings were lamentable exercises or something in which Hungarians could take pride in, what is most conspicuous about the beginnings of the "new" in Hungarian fiction (roughly from the 1890s to the end of the 1920s) is the outburst of talent in short-story writing. With a handful of notable and interesting experiments, the novel only started making headway in the second half of this period. The short story on the other hand seems to have offered the kind of narrative scope within which experimentation could bring lasting achievement. The sense one gets from tracing the course of these forty-odd years of literary development, the output of

roughly three generations of short-story writers, is that of unbroken expansion and conquest, from István Petelei (1852–1910) and Elek Gozdsu (1849–1919) in the 1880s, taken further by Sándor Bródy (1863–1924) and Géza Csáth (1887–1919), and attaining new maturity in the work of Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936) and Zsigmond Móricz (1879–1942).

Somewhere among these writers, though hardly fitting neatly in any sort of generational scheme, is Gyula Krúdy, a master, though in many ways an elusive and bewildering one, of the short story. His life and work span, in effect, the whole of the period outlined above. Born in 1878, he started writing in the early 1890s and went on to produce a prodigious body of work until his death in 1933. Unaligned by temperament, he steered a unique course in his writing. Krúdy had, of course, some affinity with what was going on in the literature of his day: his earliest writing in the 1890s evinces an awareness of Zola and a conscious attempt to create a literature of the urban scene. Later he came under the influence of the anecdotal lyricism and rural comedy of Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910). His mature writing, roughly from 1910 onwards, was favourably received by the progressive moderns of the *Nyugat* group, although conservative and ruralist literary circles also found him congenial to their own literary ideals. Finally, during the 1920s, he was increasingly seen, at least by the young and the avant-garde, as something of an anachronism, a quaint fossil of the *fin de siècle*, hopelessly outdated. No school or movement could, however, justify an exclusive claim on his work; and the more comprehensive labels such as Symbolism, Impressionism or Surrealism are only partial and, in the end, dubious help in describing Krúdy's elusive, though highly influential *œuvre*.

Part of this elusiveness lies in a strictly technical difficulty. His work, produced in haste, frequently under pressing financial circumstances, is astounding in its sheer bulk and size, and certainly makes it very difficult for the reader to arrive at any sort of comprehensive idea of what he was after. Recently, for example, editors of his short stories, drawing on Krúdy's own short-story collections and culling previously uncollected material from dailies, periodicals and short-lived literary magazines of every description, have counted an average of 75 to 80 stories *per annum* published by Krúdy during the years from 1910 to 1916; later this staggering figure became a "mere" fifteen to twenty stories published annually. And to call him essentially a short-story writer, while justifiable, truncates his achievement as he was an important novelist as well. Indeed, from 1918 onwards there is a marked swing towards longer fictional forms in his *œuvre*, leading to the wholly satisfying novels of the last decade or so of his life. Also, apart from writing his short stories and novels, he worked in a variety of strange hybrid forms. Krúdy wrote historical fiction of a sort on the medieval, Renaissance and later the Habsburg monarchs of Hungary, and on the revolutions and anti-Austrian wars for independence; he experimented with the paradoxical area between biography and

fiction, writing books on Hungarian poets of times past such as Sándor Petőfi and Endre Ady; and he also developed a unique and varied brand of non-fiction in books like *Álmoskönyv* [A Book of Dreams], fusing archaic popular superstitions about dreams and dreaming with psychologically more up-to-date advice from the Freudian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, or in *A tiszzaeszlári Sólymosi Eszter* [Eszter Sólymosi of Tiszaeszlár], a quasi-documentary reconstruction of a notorious nineteenth-century anti-Semitic court case. Therefore any assessment of Krúdy's significance will inevitably rest on selection, however judicious. Different selections may obviate a range of different, or significantly novel, perspectives on his work. This has certainly been the case in the last decade or so as a more generous selection of his work has been rescued from oblivion and made accessible in modern editions.

Another aspect of Krúdy's elusiveness derives from a stubborn confusion of the man with the author, which was widespread among his critics and readers alike. He very quickly became something of a myth in his own lifetime, or, rather, his life seemed to display a pattern of literary myth. He was seen to combine, in one person, the feudal *grandseigneur* of bygone days, the small-town hero of huge feasts of eating and drinking, as well as a true-to-type turn-of-the-century literary Bohemian. That is, he lived, money permitting, at least on the level of his public image, the half-planned and half-spontaneous, playful life of his own literary creations. He seemed to drift, dream, court, eat and drink like Kázmér Rezeda, Eduard Alvinczi *et al.* of his short-stories and novels.

This image was a highly self-conscious and carefully orchestrated *pastiche* of what constituted the crudely anachronistic life of at least a certain section of the provincial Hungarian gentry class of his youth: the pursuit of women, wine, gambling, duelling and the like. In Krúdy's writing this *pastiche* was transmuted into a language of defiant hedonistic gestures set against the wider social context of the cautious and acquisitive middle-class ethos, uninspiring, lacking all enchantment and disappointingly prosaic, which was nevertheless clamouring for recognition as a form of historical necessity. As counterpart and supplement, his life was also an almost philosophical exercise in quiet and methodical self-destruction, weirdly symbolic of the historical passing of old Hungary.

But his lifestyle was itself a piece of fiction. It expressed, in a highly stylised form, his true life, which had much prosaic squalor and poverty, especially during its last decade or so. There was also a considerable amount of hard work, much more in keeping with the pragmatic Krúdy of the middle-class ideal, which he, at least on the more mythic plane of his life, so much resented. After all, he managed to produce an *œuvre* which, if fully collected, would run to at least 120 average-size volumes. There is, then, a continuity of life and work, but there is a fundamental rupture as well. Krúdy's mythic life is best seen as a kind of extension of his literary work and best approached from the work itself. Fascination with the

man, as opposed to the work, has resulted in much critical evasion, however well-meaning, over the years.

Let then us turn to his work. Reading Krúdy with an eye to generalizing on his technique, one is struck first by the curious fact that much of the writing of this modern author draws its life from conspicuously archaic, if not primitive, narrative patterns. There is an all-pervasive quality of *serial openness* about his novels and short stories. Their stuff, never at ease in the particular form it is cast, spills over into another short story, into another novel. There is an endless recurrence of characters, motifs, situations and images that break out of the confines of the isolated and finished work and find a more convenient shape for themselves when in a pattern of the tale-within-the-tale, or the tale-tagged-onto-the-previous-tale. All this recalls the narrative technique prevalent at the beginnings of European fiction, or, for that matter, a kind of longer fictional form, the technique of potentially unlimited cumulative addition, of simple coordination. This sometimes suggests in Krúdy a highly idiosyncratic use of the old picaresque pattern and the even more ancient frame-tale. He himself recognised his debt to this archaic stratum of the narrative tradition of the West when he recalled *Arabian Nights* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* as the two most important sources of technical inspiration for his work.

Interestingly, there is no significant difference in the way this structural principle is embodied in his novels and in his short stories. In both he works with the idea of the larger series, or cycles. In his longer fiction the most noted example is the *Crimson Stagecoach* series: a loose *roman-fleuve* of six novels, written between 1913 and 1933, with the adventures of Kázmár Rezeda and Eduárd Alvinczi, two melancholy hedonists at the centre; while the *Szindbád* series, arguably Krúdy's most important work, shows, as it stands now in its collected form, the presence of this principle in an even more intriguing complexity, since it contains ninety Szindbád stories, eleven "nights" of Szindbád's dreams and, additionally, two Szindbád novels.

This almost exclusive reliance on an archaic and simple structural idea leaves, of course, the work dangerously vulnerable to technical criticism. On the other hand, there is something paradoxically and sophisticatedly modern in the author's defiantly self-conscious choice of the archaic and the primitive in narrative tradition; a charitable view would stress Krúdy's significance as the practitioner of a form of the modern *romance* in his longer fiction and praise his adjustments of this primordial pattern of cumulative addition as a major technical achievement.

On the other hand, there are many places in an admittedly uneven fictional *œuvre* where a less charitable view can find ground for doubts and misgivings. Such a view would, with some justification, point out that looseness is looseness, despite the counterweight of authorial self-consciousness, or of the author's subtle emphasis on *pastiche* and the irony implied in his handling of time-worn narrative

convention. On this count, the novels would turn out to be either over-extended short stories or, simply, a number of short stories yoked together by the gentle violence of skilfully handled atmospheric continuity or kinship. Some exception might be made for the novels of the last phase, especially for the compact concentration and dazzling irony of *Boldogult úrfikoromban* (1928) [My Long-past Days as a Young Man Gallant].

One way out of this critical dilemma (which is, incidentally, seldom addressed and is far from properly settled) is, of course, to stress Krúdy's significance as a short-story writer; here, in the more compact form, either there is no danger of structural looseness or if there is, it is turned into innovative gain. When we consider the short stories as units in the larger series, the series themselves may well be seen as a particularly happy compromise struck between short story and novel, suggesting, by carefully placed voids and absences, a potential novel, which is never quite realized fully. Here Krúdy is certainly an important innovator of fictional method: the technical thrust behind *Szindbád* shows a significant degree of affinity with similar experiments elsewhere, ranging from Hemingway's *In Our Time* to Babel's *Red Cavalry*, and, to include another notable Hungarian example from the same period, Dezső Kosztolányi's *Kornél Esti* series.

What is equally important to realize about Krúdy's work that it is a writing of *texture* as opposed to *structure*; his intense poetic effects are predominantly those of language, style and imagery where structural organization, or the semblance of it, is in many cases no more than an excuse for creating a rich atmosphere of restrained sadness and muted nostalgia. And it is precisely here where a unique transmutation of Krúdy's archaic narrative patterns take place: if we recognize, say, in the *Crimson Stagecoach* series or in *Szindbád* the presence of some loosely picaresque organization, we are bound to realize that this is a rather curious sort of picaresque. The books are series of adventures, certainly; but these adventures are only suggestions of adventures rather, taking place mostly in the mind of the protagonist, half-imagined, half-remembered; they are, indeed, adventures of remembering and feeling, small dislocations of attitude, muted perceptions of minute sensual and erotic shocks; adventures of atmosphere, of mood, of the ineffable moment frozen into a static image of sharply defined experience.

It is also texture that transmutes his staple material into a subtly nostalgic and quietly disturbing poetry. Again some of this material is truly archaic, as Krúdy draws on a great submerged store of folktale, fantasy and fairy-tale, in short, on the miraculous (in the old, classical sense of the term). Kosztolányi, writing on *Szindbád*, described the stories as "modern symbolic tales." The same transmutation, "modern" and "symbolic," affects another part of the usual Krúdy material: the deliberately picked cheap, sentimental and tawdry stock-in-trade of the *fin de siècle*, of anecdotal cliché, of Sunday supplement purple prose, all of which a generous and ironic use is made in his work. At his worst, Krúdy is not much better

than his ready-made material; at his best, however, his texture will always create a subtle distance, signal the limitations of his material and, by doing so, transcend it, distilling from it the kind of significance we associate with memory, dream, archetype and myth: the symbolic matrix of subconscious experience.

This world in its circumstantial detail is a kind of Hungary of dreams, a condensation into symbol of recognisable bits and pieces of the pre-modern era. It is made up of densely atmospheric images of small-town ennui, the rural peace of country mansions, small and secretive corners of a larger world, wayside inns, boarding-houses and cafés, each with its own small weird surprises. It is a world of virgins and widows, frozen into the immobility of a daydream, and country gentlemen living out their allotted time in a sort of resigned and dutiful hedonism. It is a world on the wane, an existence of sad futility, that shadow area where life merges imperceptibly into death, a strange, calm and timeless world that the conjugal omnipresence of Eros and Thanatos fuses into a translucent vision.

This is the poetry of *Szindbád*, Krúdy's most sustained and certainly most central achievement. This collection was the result of his slow maturity as a writer. Krúdy published his first collection of Szindbád stories, *Szindbád ifjúsága* [Sindbad's youth], in 1911, and here he found the voice and style that was to remain uniquely his own by appropriating and transmuting the figure of the mythic sailor of *Arabian Nights*. It is symbolic in that the last work he managed to complete was the Szindbád novel *Purgatórium* [Purgatory] in 1933; he handed in the manuscript to his editor five days before his death.

Szindbád is a composite symbol. First, he is a very personal creation, a mask of the author, a poetic *persona* through which Krúdy could articulate his secret self-image. He is also, more recognisably, a version of the familiar *fin-de-siècle* type, a variation on the *poète maudit*, excluded from ordinary life, rootless, on an endless and melancholy quest for experience, a woman, food or drink. A resigned hedonist and metaphysically saddened Panurge, Szindbád knows that his quest is impossible as it is an attempt to return to experience irrevocably lost, a doomed striving to re-live what is already a world of dream and memory. It is a quest, ultimately, for death, if not itself a form of dying. (In one of the relatively early stories of the series, Szindbád dies, turns into a rosary bead, then sets out on his quest again as a ghost, symbolically embodying life-in-death or death-in-life.)

Moreover, Szindbád is somehow a mythic condensation of the young man gallant of the Hungarian gentry class. His social function lost, his life is lived on the plane of dreams and memories. Indeed, his life *is* a form of dream and memory, with Szindbád dreaming himself, remembering himself. This is completed by a more philosophical meaning to his character. Technically, the short-story novel owes something to nineteenth-century Russian fiction, especially to Turgenev's *The Diary of a Sportsman*. There is a more general debt in Szindbád to the idea of "the superfluous man" in Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Goncharov, a corpus of

reading Krúdy readily acknowledged as decisive in its impact for his own work. Accordingly, Szindbád is a man of metaphysical superfluity, suggesting a definition of man *as* superfluity, as a gratuitous addition to the universe. In this the character foreshadows the existential anti-hero of much of later modernist fiction in Hungary as well as elsewhere. The book of which he is the central character (indeed, the book that *is* him), *Szindbád*, this ironically conceived and lyrically dissolved anti-*Bildungsroman*, stands as the most important single achievement of its author, the master work of a major Hungarian prose-poet of the Modernist era.