

**WOMAN AS GODDESS
IN KRÚDY'S *SUNFLOWER***

by

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Gyula Krúdy's novel *Sunflower* (*Napraforgó*), a work of the great Hungarian writer's full maturity that I have recently translated, treats the ultimate themes: Life and Death and Transformation. Krúdy himself stated his aims in a December 1917 letter to the editor of *Virradat*, the Budapest daily in which the novel originally appeared in instalments during the first half of 1918:

My work aims to be a modern Hungarian novel, yet its contents are as old as the soil of this land....In back of this novel lies an old desire, a suspended momentum, a long-absent concentrated effort. Also, a furtive little cemetery breeze that nudges me: What will you leave behind after you are gone?...So, let's see what remains in life for one by the time you think yourself wise, calm and collected.

Despite such overt awareness of his goals, Krúdy in this novel, as well as elsewhere in his vast output of fiction, seems to work in an unconscious trance, weaving a web of images that, on reflection, proves to be an astonishing evocation of the Great Goddess of old Europe, serving as more than mere counterfoil, substratum or matrix for the grand figure projected in *Sunflower*, namely that of Pistoli, the Hungarian Falstaff. The escapades of Pistoli occupy the foreground, providing parables of death in life and life in death, but in the end it is the aspects of the ancient Great Goddess, shining through this book's dazzling array of female characters, that fill out the tapestry of the novel and justify its position as one of the classics of early twentieth-century European literature.

By his fortieth year Krúdy had a respectable body of work behind him, after more than twenty years of residence in Budapest, where he had first moved in 1896, from his native Nyíregyháza in eastern Hungary. After a long apprenticeship, success first came around age thirty, with the publication of his "*Sindbad stories*", followed by his first masterwork, "*The Red Stagecoach*" (*A vörös póstakocsi*) a novel published in 1911. Over these first two decades Krúdy's fiction covered the Hungarian countryside, and to a lesser extent, scenes of life in Budapest, in a manner partially derived from his noted predecessor, Mikszáth. The *Sindbad stories* revolved around the amorous experiences of the author's alterego, while "*The Red Stagecoach*" had as

protagonist the eccentric aristocrat Alvinczy, based on Krúdy's early patron, Count Miklós Szemere. What made Krúdy's style distinctive, and indicated the highest literary promise, was his poetic power: lyric, elegiac and epic, manifesting in volume upon volume of what was, after all, prose fiction. Much has been said about Krúdy's unique handling of time, with occasional comparisons to Proust. I believe these two writers, although near-contemporaries, are nonetheless worlds apart. Proust's attempt to recover lost time is a concentrated, consciously rational endeavour of intro- and retro-spection, a painstaking unraveling of the many strands of personal history and experience that compose the manifold web of the author's psyche. Krúdy's grand oeuvre, on the other hand, is scattered and rhapsodic, awaiting, as it were, the future reader's subsequent contributions, to be reassembled into a hypertext based on the approximately eighty volumes containing scores of novels and novellas, and thousands of shorter pieces. In this vast assemblage of works, fiction mingles with factual chronicle, the historical past with the historical present, to produce, through a process of alchemical *poiesis*, a chronological never-never land, as may be seen when we examine the time frame of *Sunflower* itself.

As the historian John Lukacs writes in a superb essay on Krúdy, "The Sound of a Cello", (reworked into the first chapter of his *Budapest 1900*):

...his novels have only the thinnest of plots. They are four-dimensional paintings, whose magical beauty is manifested not only through shades and forms but through the fourth dimension of human reality – time itself – as the thin stream of the story all at once bursts into a magnificent fountain, the water splashing and coursing in rainbow colors. Like Balzac, Krúdy wrote every day...Unlike Balzac, he never corrected his manuscripts, and he cared little for proofs.

In the case of *Sunflower*, Krúdy had to deliver 37 instalments of approximately 2,500 words each, every few days from January through May 1918. Indeed, there was little opportunity for revision. As a matter of fact, Krúdy inserted about a hundred corrections, mostly minor changes, in a later

edition, but aside from that, the eleven chapters of *Sunflower*, which is arguably the roundest and most perfectly wrought novel in the author's huge oeuvre, must have been written, no matter how premeditated, in solitary séances of trance-like outpouring.

Sunflower is set in turn-of-the-century Hungary, 1900 plus or minus a few years, but in this case the actual location, the wetlands along the upper Tisza River in eastern Hungary, is far more important than the chronological time. Significantly for a work written during the final, dreadful year of the Great War, the novel does not contain a single reference to the ongoing bloody conflict. Rather, it purports to be a summation of a peacetime, rural and bucolic way of life, the comfortable, idyllic existence of the petty nobility that for centuries formed the conscious identity of the Hungarian nation. Consciousness has its limitations naturally, and it is due to Krúdy's art that the novel's panorama projects far more than these implied limits contain. The acts and words of the central triad of male characters go a long way toward defining the historical consciousness reigning in pre-war Hungary. Yet it is their interactions with the narrative's six female characters (actually as many as nine, if we include Pistoli's three ex-wives!) that sound the full orchestration of *Sunflower's* underlying themes and underscore the novel's ambitious aims. The dominant, fully rendered figure of Mr Pistoli, a middle-aged country squire, is complemented by two younger men, Andor Álmos-Dreamer and Kálmán Ossuary, who are, in simplified terms, positive and negative aspects of the turn-of-the-century male psyche. The three men revolve in a complex interweaving dance around the twin-like forms of two young women, Eveline Nyirjes and Malvina Maszkerádi, likewise embodiments of positive and negative forces. Other women featured in the novel are: the "bygone Eveline" who was Andor's mother, Rizujlett, a kind-hearted hetera, and Pistoli's two mistresses, Stony Dinka and Fanny Late. Another main character in *Sunflower* is the land itself, as it awakens from its winter sleep; the very soil of the Nyírség region in eastern Hungary that gave rise not only to the novel's three protagonists (Pistoli, Álmos-Dreamer and Eveline) – but to the author, Gyula Krúdy, as well.

The opening chapter introduces us to Eveline Nyirjes, a twenty-two year old all alone in life, in her Budapest town house, which she soon leaves in the middle of the winter season, to return to her roots, her country estate on the upper reaches of the Tisza River. Budapest serves only as backdrop, figuring prominently in only one scene of the novel, that features Eveline's good-for-nothing beau, the gambler Kálmán Ossuary, at his favorite hangouts, the casino and the all-night café. The only wholly Budapest character is Malvina Maszkerádi, Eveline's close friend and classmate, a fascinating portrait of an early-twentieth century "liberated woman". She joins Eveline on a prolonged sojourn at the latter's country retreat, where they are soon followed by Ossuary, and where the resonant, resplendent, larger-than-life Pistoli appears, (accompanied by his Gypsies,) as a suitor for Malvina Maszkerádi's hand, to serenade the young ladies. Pistoli is described as follows:

Mr Pistoli was a patron of village Gypsies. He spent his entire life among Gypsies, returning home only to calm down the wife of the moment, to tint his mustache, clip the bristles sprouting from his warts, spruce up his hair with pomade, scatter creditors' letters onto the midden heap, and off he was again, in search of the band. If a woman became a burden to him, he eased his load as best as he could and took on a new wife. This half-mad country squire was a leftover from the Hungary of old, where menfolk even in extreme old age refused to be incapacitated. He waltzed around merrily with willing women, like a dance instructor giving an apprentice girl a whirl. His big buck teeth, protuberant bullish eyes, lowering, growling voice, oversized, meaty-lobed ears, calloused knuckles and pipestem legs altogether produced a peculiar effect on females of the entire region. For there are still many women around of the type who will kiss the spot where her man had hit her, who will put up with years of suffering to receive a kind word or two at the last hour, who will cut off her hair, pull out her teeth, put out her bright eyes, clench down her empty stomach, ignore her tormenting passion, say goodbye to springtime, beauty, life itself – if her man so commands. Pistoli went about growling like a wild boar,

and women wiggled their toes at him, to tease the monster. Thus he lived to bury three wives.

Pistoli's love object, Malvina Maszkerádi, is not the least bit impressed by "this provincial stumblebum", his "Tartar manners" and his ragtag village musicians. She considers herself a "modern woman", holds "every man to be insane", and proudly declares she has never been in love.

I believe only in myself, and myself alone, and don't give a damn about others' opinions. I view each of my acts as if reading about it fifty years from now...Did I do something ridiculous and dumb?...Will I have to be ashamed of some weakness...? Had I been born a man, I would have been a Talmudist, an Oriental sage, a scholar delving into decaying, millennial mysteries. Too bad I was not admitted at the university...

Yet Miss Maszkerádi does admit one love object in her life: a solitary old willow tree standing on the bank of a dry stream bed, with "a virile, calm, patriarchal equanimity". Her imagination endows the tree with a human character that proves to be a prefiguration of Pistoli himself:

At times she fancied the tree as an aging vagabond who had weathered many a hardship in his wifeless life, tramped about aimless as a muddy dog, having been the kept lover of hunk-hankering females, hungry for life; he knew and despised love's joys and woes, had plucked his share of triumph and hopelessness, taken quiet delight in success, women on their knees to kiss his hand; passionless to the point of not even pretending a semblance of emotion, he seduced women in his path, then sent them packing from his turf, so many used-up playmates; they had loved and hated him, caressed him with trembling hands, then flung curses at his head, the way chambermaids in Pest toss trash out of a window... This manly one stayed calm and collected by living the inward life, thinking his own thoughts and always doing whatever felt good. He never kept a flower, a lock of hair, or remembrance of a kiss.

He dealt with women as they deserved. Never did he wander heartachy, on moonlit nights, under anyone's window, no matter how much awaited... He might prowl about for a week or two like a dog in springtime, then, all skin and bones and weary of the world, he would return from his wanderings and never recall what happened to him abroad, what women had said, what they smelled and tasted like... Miss Maszkerádi positively abhorred novelists who always write about old men remembering youthful adventures. Thus she could not stand Turgenev, whom Eveline would have read night and day.

This last catty comment about novelists in the Turgenev mode is a tongue-in-cheek barb aimed by Krúdy at his own former self, the reminiscing author who wrote the popular Sindbad stories ten years earlier. (Turgenev, by the way, was one of Krúdy's lifelong favorites, along with Dickens and Thackeray.)

Eveline, who may be said to be the novel's protagonist, embodies the positive characteristics of traditional Hungarian womanhood, just as her male counterpart, Andor Álmos-Dreamer does for the masculine equivalent. He is tellingly named after Álmos (meaning Dreamer), the quasi-legendary forefather who, in the ninth century of our era led the Magyar tribes on their wanderings from the steppes north of the Black Sea to the present-day Hungarian homeland in the Carpathian Basin. Álmos-Dreamer, living alone on his island in the Tisza River, is a late, dreamy epigone, the last scion of his family, and Krúdy introduces him in this manner:

His aspect was as calm as twilight in the country. He loved the winter silence. In the spring he liked to smoke a cigar and listen to passing raftsmen's songs. He was neither extravagant nor a maniac, but persisted on his island with the utter tenacity of an otter. He was a natural scientist whose name had never seen the light of print. He was one link in the chain of bygone generations of Hungarian gentlemen who, just to amuse themselves during the long winter nights, learned French or English by perusing the tomes in their libraries. As septuagenarians they would take up the study of astronomy.

They knew their Horace and Berzsenyi [*translator's note: Dániel Berzsenyi, Hungarian poet, 1776-1836*] by heart. But they refrained from speaking out at the county assembly for they despised electioneering politicians. Calfskin-bound, yellowing classics bore their ex-libris. Surely the bookmarks still remain at the page they were reading on the deathbed.

The passive, retiring Álmos-Dreamer's role is to reclaim Eveline from Budapest, from the negative influence of her urban friends Miss Maszkerádi and Kálmán Ossuary, (although it is Pistoli who takes up the active combat against these two intruders). Álmos-Dreamer recedes into a pseudo-suicide that occasions a flashback giving the history of his mother, also called Eveline, a *femme fatale* who lived to bury three husbands who died for her sake, the last one being Álmos-Dreamer's own father. This "bygone Eveline" is, in every sense, a doppelgänger, a demonic double of the living, "palpable Eveline", and here we begin to approach the mythic dimensions projected by the female participants in *Sunflower's* timeless dance of life and death.

For the return of this bygone Eveline signals that there is much more going on in *Sunflower* than a typical, turn-of-the-century "battle of the sexes" drama à la Strindberg, here acted out by the melodramatic shenanigans of Pistoli and Miss Maszkerádi. This "bygone Eveline", Álmos-Dreamer's mother, had already driven two husbands to death via duels fought on her behalf, when she comes up against Ákos Álmos-Dreamer, who, in his turn, "had buried his three former wives without undue emotional stress". He is the offspring of a family whose males had "for centuries...stalked wealthy widows, moneyed elderly women and females with prized dowries, pretty much the way they hunted the rarer kinds of egret in the marshy reeds of the Tisza". The linking of water bird and woman is significant, as is the location, which happens to be the site of numerous archaeological relics dating back to the 7000-year-old "Tisza culture" whose object of worship was the Great Goddess in her manifold manifestations, chief among them the waterbird.

Around the middle of the 19th century, the predatory, patriarchal Álmos-Dreamers found their match in the form of this "bygone Eveline", a

"blonde witch in whose blue eyes shone all the colors of a mountain stream. She was as supple as a silvery birch in the springtime. And like tumbleweed, she clung to men's heads. She spoke the language of grasses, old trees and crossroads. She could make herself understood to beasts. The windmill's blades stopped when she blew at them."

But whoa, hold it... Where are we, all of a sudden? A mid-19th century witch... out to destroy Ákos Álmos-Dreamer, father of the Andor Álmos-Dreamer who, at age forty, sometime around the turn of the century lays himself down in his coffin for love of the 22-year-old, "palpable Eveline", the ostensible heroine of the novel *Sunflower*. But she is not, really; or at least she is not alone in this role. She is merely the chief one of the many aspects of the heroine of this novel who, I maintain, is no one person, no, not even any human figure, but is in fact the Great Goddess herself, embodied over and over, in the diverse forms of the several women characters in this book, as well as in the land itself, in the very passing of her seasons from winter into spring and summertime. To obtain a fuller view, let us momentarily step out of *Sunflower*, and consult the works of Marija Gimbutas documenting the Neolithic cult of the Great Goddess, such as *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982) and *The Language of the Goddess* (1989).

Gimbutas's oeuvre provides a painstaking marshalling of archaeological finds, myths and cult images from all over Europe, from the Palaeolithic on, including artifacts of the late Neolithic and Chalcolithic (stone and copper) periods, among them, notably, the so-called "Tisza culture" datable to around 5,000 B.C., with a number of sites excavated along the upper reaches of the Tisza River, in the counties of Szabolcs-Szatmár, exactly where the fictional village of Bujdos is located in Krúdy's novel. This close geographical correspondence is a coincidence, of sorts; nor do I believe that Krúdy could have had access to much, if any, information about the "Tisza culture", most of whose artifacts were to be excavated in the latter part of our century.

In brief, Gimbutas's works describe the cult of the 'Old World Goddess' in her many forms, which may be divided into three phases:

- (1) life-giving/creative,
- (2) death-giving/destructive, and
- (3) transformative/regenerative.

These three aspects of the Goddess are expressed through numerous cultic images preserved in earthenware, stone, bone and metal artifacts. Gimbutas emphasizes that the popularly accepted terms "fertility, or mother goddess" express only one of the deity's functions: birth. This life-giving aspect is embodied by the image of the Bird and Snake Goddess, who dwelt "beyond the upper waters", past meandering labyrinths. Thus her images were often decorated with abstract labyrinthine meanders and zigzags, symbolizing water. "The Goddess in all her manifestations was a symbol of the unity of all life in Nature. Her power was in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees and flowers." This primordial Goddess cult became gradually displaced and hybridized by the onset of the androcentric symbolic system of the succeeding Indo-European civilizations. According to Gimbutas, "the Old European sacred images and symbols were never totally uprooted; these most persistent features in human history were too deeply implanted in the psyche. They could have disappeared only with the total extermination of the female population....The Goddess gradually retreated into the depths of forests or onto mountain tops. ... In later Christian times, the Birth Giver and Earth Mother fused with the Virgin Mary."

Most of the cult images amassed by Gimbutas's research occur and recur in Krúdy's *Sunflower*, to the extent that we may say the novel is practically saturated with the presence of the Goddess. First and foremost, her aqueous world appears in the numerous descriptions of the watery terrain: the marshy wetlands, the "island world" of the upper Tisza, amply showered by spring rains.

Then there are the numerous references to the *Bird*. This is the main epiphany of the Goddess as Giver of All, including life and death, happiness and wealth, alias Fate. Thus, waterfowl (duck, goose, swan) bring happiness,

wealth, nourishment; birds of prey (vulture, owl, raven, crow) are omens of death and epiphanies of the Death Wielder. The cuckoo and owl are also prophetic birds. And let us not forget that Pistoli's sidekick and messenger is named Kakuk – meaning cuckoo.

Sunflower is simply teeming with birds. The first one appears in the second paragraph of the book, in the form of Eveline's recollection of her first love, "seagull-like whooshing by on the north wind". Her "antique" town house is described as "a labyrinth of zigzag corridors", including a "spiral" staircase. From here she returns to her country estate, where "the marshy groves, reeds, snaking rills were all snowed under, disappearing for the entire season like enraptured women sequestered with pagan lovers... All creatures here -- dogs, horses, humans – saluted her as their queen." More to the point, Pistoli, in his fulsome toast welcoming her return, calls Eveline "the dove-hearted mistress of the house...whose hands shower on this miserable countryside blessings as abundant as the lily's pollen" and "the snow-white egret whose return tenderizes the barren soil of local hearts, like springtime rain quickening the hard crust of the field..."

Likewise, the "bygone Eveline", the death-wielding, bewitching wife who eases Ákos Álmos-Dreamer's passage from life, is also associated with water-bird imagery. By refusing to yield her body to her husband's advances, she drives the formerly virile man to drink and distraction, and eventually to suicide. Here is how Krúdy works in the water-bird theme:

The island that sheltered from men's eyes his beloved wife (like stolen treasure), was surrounded by the Tisza floodlands. In the distance lay The Birches, monotonous sandy hills barren of all thought, darkling furze thickets asleep on the horizon like so many trembling widows, the wild geese departing from this region under night's dark tapestry like fleeing spirits honking their farewells in weird voices from the sad heights, as if summoning every unhappy person below.

"Ghee-gaw!" cried these enigmatic birds of other worlds and other shores.

That's what these voices sound like to the marshdwelling fisherman in his lair, but one who loves life's wonders will find

all sorts of meaning in the voices emanating from the dark. Ákos Álmos-Dreamer awaited the wild geese to summon him into the blue yonder. He would go away from here like a drenched, dark, frost-winged wild goose, far, far away... And once the gander is gone from the nest the female, too, would follow on the mysterious highways of heaven's vault. At sunrise, when it is still too dark, in high altitudes' golden oceans the bird would swim after her mate, just like a sad, worry-worn swan.

"Ghee-gaw!" comes from the other world Lord Álmos-Dreamer's cry, and Eveline, humbling herself, would obediently follow in his wake to the land of dreams.

And the doomed man does away with himself after at last winning his untouchable wife's favors on a spring night when "the water snake sheds its old skin, fish and lizards borrow their brightness from the moon, and ancient, mute waterfowl vow eternal silence"... This is the night of Andor Álmos-Dreamer's conception.

This same Andor is rescued from the deathlike torpor of a self-willed death by the timely appearance of his beloved, the novel's "palpable Eveline", who confronts the portrait of Andor's bewitching mother in a scene heavily suggestive of the two women's near-identity as different aspects of the Goddess:

The late Eveline's lifesize portrait hung on the wall, and next to it the living Eveline now appeared, the very image of the painting come to life and stepped out of its frame. The resemblance was striking. As if that extraordinary woman – who had wreaked such havoc in the lives of patient, gullible men, setting frozen hearts ablaze like a bonfire built by shivering woodcutters at the edge of a forest – it was as if this woman had come back to life. Being exceptional, she was given a second life to live, for one life had not been enough to accomplish here on earth all that was waiting for her to do. As if she had turned back at the gates of eternal repose, having noticed that her limbs were still youthful, her eyes still fiery, and the candleflame still unextinguished in her cold heart. She had

returned for another round, to meet new men, to drain love's goblet anew... Only her rich, honey-blond mane had been left behind, underground. At the time of her emergence from the soil, along with the cowslips and dragonflies, the fields bore a thick crop of rye. For a crown of hair she plaited herself a wreath of ripe rye, spiky russet and yellow grasses. Her hair had red-brown streaks, like tiger spots. The first moonlit night taught her the arts of witchcraft and sorcery, when among the trees' sleeping boughs the souls of the dead glide like so many bats. Young birch trees ooze a sap that the pale-skinned women of the region lap up so that their legs stay forever limber, and even in old age they ride the broomstick with bright gleaming knees. In *The Birches* there is no need to take special lessons in giving men the evil eye. Migratory birds' early springtime calls like strange local melodies wind their way into women's voices, their hips radiate the brooding duck's nestling warmth, their glances emulate the sunworship in the eye of the lanky sunflower straining after the sun. Their hair, like the tender young crop in the fields, is raked by the capricious fingers of the wayward winds.

The palpable Eveline stood lingering under the portrait of the bygone Eveline and exchanged a look of sympathy with her predecessor. Her heartache was gone like a child's hurt blown away by a mother's kiss; she immediately felt her strange power in this house where all things owed her allegiance. She felt she had come home to claim the heritage of the bygone mistress of the house whose swaying skirts were almost still visible just around the doorposts. All she had to do was follow her trail. On the itinerant painter's primitive oil portrait the elongate, white hand was pointing ahead, a magical sign, as it were, for future women who enter this abode. Eveline followed the pointing finger.

In a subsequent scene, where Andor confesses his love for Eveline, he refers to her "bird-like sadness", and declares: "You are death and you are life". She responds by "lowering her arms like a wounded bird her wings". Afterward, on her drive home, "bright magpies fly up on hedges...The shaggy,

leafless grove...hides frog-headed, owl-footed, twittering shadows... Lingered crows inscribe wavering circles overhead, in hopes of a feast – it's all the same to them if they make a meal of neighbor or kin... High up above the reeds...all by its lonely self floats a nameless bird..."

Pistoli's visit to a former mistress, Stony Dinka, serves as another instance for an appearance of the Goddess in her nurturing aspect. Breaking down in her presence, he cries like a child, and wipes his tear-soaked face in her skirt. He confesses that:

I could always feel myself secure by your side – let the dogs bark outdoors, but in here, under these rafters no danger could penetrate, for your determination, your extraordinary feminine toughness would make sure that no harm came to me at your place. In my dream you were the tall chestnut mare whose neck I clasped to escape the flood. It was your two fine eyes looking at me from that mare's glance.

A footnote: according to Gimbutas, during the Bronze Age, there was a transformation of the death-wielding Bird of Prey Goddess...into a mare. And let us add here that "long-legged herons strutted in the wetlands" around the tavern that Stony Dinka is proprietress of.

On his way home at the end of the book Pistoli witnesses a pilgrim's procession. In the following passage we may note how the ancient Goddess's cult survives in the Christian cult of the Virgin Mary. Krúdy again brings in the waterbird motif:

It was the Feast of Our Lady. Knapsack on their backs, the daughters of the soil marched barefoot and chanted tirelessly on their way to the chapel at Máriapócs. The Blessed Lady was already awaiting them at the church of the sandal-wearing friars, shedding her tears for her devotees, both hands laden with forgiveness and solace. So the women trudged on, like turkey hens with wings weighed down by the leaden rain of transgressions and tribulations. They had brought along one or

two older men, in case men were more familiar with the way to the heavenly kingdom. These superannuated elders had regained their manhood for the occasion of the pilgrimage and marched at the head of the procession with an air of leadership, and recited their litanies as if the entire flock's salvation depended on them. ("Too bad I won't live to be a pilgrimage-leader to the Pócs feast," thought Pistoli, and all sorts of mischievous prayers crossed his mind.) The women kept chanting their responses, with the same unwearying persistence with which they kneaded the bread dough: "Mary, Mother of God, have mercy on us."

... They would pass the night under God's open sky: the women would wrap their skirts around their feet, tie their kerchiefs under their chins, light small candles in the field, and under the browsing moonlight dream about the kingdom of heaven and angels clad in crimson. Among the sleepers an old man, the lead gander, keeps the watch, nodding and dozing. If a flock of wild geese should happen to pass overhead, they would surely honk out a greeting to their distant kin.

And a final vision of Pistoli's leaves us with a striking image of the novels' twin heroines as two different embodiments of the ancient Goddess:

Up on one mountaintop in the far distance sat Eveline. Her benevolent face was distorted, her curls hung in grizzled knots, her dear eyes were veiled by cataracts, night had descended over her lips, like a madwoman's... And this hag had been her, once: the kind, noble, lamblike, dove-hearted one... This ancient, deranged crone had once been Eveline Nyirjes... Pistoli covered his eyes and sobbed. But even through his tears he could see the other mountaintop on the horizon, where Miss Maszkerádi bobbed like a crazed belly-dancer. Her tresses undone, her voice screeching, her talons curving, her eyes spitting flames and knives, her legs like a wolf's, her neck ringed like a serpent's.

From here, Pistoli's last journey leads to the cemetery, where he joins the Earth Mother in her role as transformative queen of the watery realm and of the underworld:

The blessed May rain kept falling in the vast night, on grasses, trees, meadows, heaven's waters descending to fertilize all things down here on earth. Each drop of rain swaddled a newborn that would grow up to man's estate by summer's end. One would become an ear of wheat, another a bunch of grapes, the third only a clunky-headed onion. A downpour, an infinite host of tiny newborns in the mysterious night. The patter of millions of little feet woke the tiller of the soil, who crossed himself gratefully lying on his cot. The fields, the shaggy trees, the sleeping and deeply respiring shrubs lay sprawled under the rain's kisses, like dreaming women. To make sure the labour of fertilization goes on underground as well, was now the task of Mr Pistoli and his companions, the ones who died this night in Hungary. They would all stoke the furnace down below, these old men turned to coal and fuel, who sacrificed their shanks, hipbones, and enlarged livers, so that up here all sorts of beautiful new flowers may bloom. That trees may unfurl their foliage, and lovers tumble in the fuzzy hair of meadows. Those pockmarked old faces give rise to tearoses flourishing on the earth's surface. Those sad hands, weary limbs, aching backbones, knees long past their spring, the fuel provided by the old ones, nurture anemones that grow in the graveyard.

In conclusion: on the one hand, we have the late-20th century "state-of-the-art" archaeological evidence that clearly documents the existence of a flourishing Goddess-cult in the upper Tisza region – as indeed all over the area labeled "Old Europe", including much of present-day Central and Eastern Europe. And, on the other hand, we have Gyula Krúdy's novel *Sunflower*, which, the author announces, "aims to be...a novel of the very soil...", containing a surprisingly large number and variety of images coinciding with those of the ancient Goddess cult. There is no evidence that Krúdy was aware of the archaeological finds, or that these had even been available at the time. Yet there are too many instances of Goddess-related

imagery in the novel to be dismissed as mere coincidence. Beyond the instances cited, just to name a few others, there are also the following parallels:

Both Eveline and Rizujlett (who is nicknamed "Our Lady's Fountain") have circular gardens, resembling the circular energy centers associated with the Goddess cult; the "double-headed Goddess" image is echoed by three sets of "twin" female characters: the two Evelines, Eveline-Maszkerádi, and Pistoli's two mistresses; the "masked Goddess" image is reflected in Miss Maszkerádi's name; the so-called "padded knickers" worn by these masked figurines crop up in the form of references to the old-fashioned flannel knickers with zig-zag(!) stitching, that are frowned upon by the "modern" Maszkerádi, but favored by Eveline and extolled by Pistoli... and so on, with repeated references to bulls and bees, butterflies, swallows, snakes, frogs, hedgehogs and footprints...

And so, to define the time frame of *Sunflower*, we may imagine a diagram of three concentric circles: the innermost one being the novel's historical present, somewhere around 1900; the second, middle ring being the recent historical past, including both the 19th-century epoch of the "bygone Eveline" and the preceding centuries of the millennial Álmos family, while the outermost circle, (outlined in dots) stands for the boundless ancient time of the Great Goddess, the time of the beginnings of, if not history, then the earliest forms of culture: language as incantation, weaving, pottery, metallurgy. A primeval and timeless time, a time of beginnings, worlds apart from the year of the novel's publication, 1918 – which may have seemed to the seer's eyes as the beginning of the end. This boundless, outer circle of the Goddess' time, as sensed by the poet's soul, surrounds, includes, and imbues our poor, petty present, which is so overdetermined and constricted by the rational limits and national/ethnic borderlines and identities brought on by the "androcentric", "Indo-European" warring last 3 or 4 millennia. Krúdy's world, as witnessed by *Sunflower* and the rest of his wonderful, as yet untranslated oeuvre, aims not so much at an unreturnable past, but radiates toward the open matrix of the future.

Pistoli's Funeral
Chapter 9 of *Sunflower*

Anyone who thinks that Miss Maszkerádi failed to attend Mr Pistoli's funeral simply does not know this remarkable young lady. Yessir, off she went, having persuaded Eveline that they must not omit to pay their final respects.

"With any luck, we'll get to see every scoundrel and loose hussy in this county assembled around their gangleader's coffin. The local Falstaff, Pistoli, is dead. What poorboy, tramp or cracked-heel servant girl could stay away?"

Thus spoke Maszkerádi, putting a dark veil over her face, one that had formerly sheltered her tender complexion on an ocean cruise. Behind that veil she was free to shed a tear or smile and turn serious. Why should these villagers get to see the private thoughts of an exclusive lady at the funeral of the black sheep?

The coffin was walnut wood, and only one man was sitting next to it. It was Kakuk, who had for the occasion replenished his impoverished wardrobe by consulting Pistoli's closet. The oversize jacket and trousers hung rather loosely on the self-appointed heir. He had to stuff paper into the hat to make it fit. The bootlegs stuck out. His hands could not leave the pockets of the pants (cut tight along traditional Hungarian lines).

Out in the courtyard the villagers stood about in solemn silence. As if Mr Pistoli's death had not yet been quite verified. Who knows, maybe this whole thing was an elaborate prank. He might screech and thump inside his coffin, yet.

Rizujlett arrived in deep mourning.

This remarkable lady never felt ashamed in public on account of her lovers. Her only concern was that the Captain should not suspect a thing. This was perhaps the tenth time she donned the mourning outfit she had ordered after the death of her first lover, a Calvinist clergyman. Since then, many a time did Rizujlett's nose turn red from crying behind her veil, for even the most melodious lovers have a way of dying, just like any old field hand. How strange, the way a person is laid out, someone who only yesterday was

still waltzing around, organizing picnics, telling subtle lies to women, roaming and fretting like a maniac. Yes, ordinary lovers die – as do exceptional ones. Those refined gentlemen, who launch midnight serenades and poems for openers, and have to be teased and encouraged until they are good and ready to do the deed, patient loving plus gorgeous words... Just about every man has his own peculiar manner of stringing words together, and there are many who like to regurgitate something they read the day before in some encyclopedia or book of poems. Around these parts, the poet Tompa's Flower Myths was a fixture of every library once upon a time. Anyway, they had all gone and died, the simple ones, the taciturn, the bored, the slow-witted, the devil-may-care. The sly ones and the play-it-safers, they, too, had to go and meet their Maker, and Rizujlett was there to weep for them, musing about their lives, their acts, their long-expired words. The veil of mourning was earned by anyone who had ever spent a pleasant hour or two at the house where Rizujlett was the reigning lady. Returning home, she laid a flower for the dead by the photo of the deceased, and recited the rogation her prayerbook designated for this purpose. – Ah, nothing remained in life now but reveries!

Yet others arrived for Pistoli's funeral, as for some event of vital importance. The deceased take away with themselves a piece of one's own life. From now on anyone who had known Mr Pistoli would have that much less to live for.

Here came Fanny Late, keeper of the Zonett, and here came Stony Dinka, from The Rubadub. As long as Pistoli had been alive, these two women never missed a chance to revile each other. They thought of each other with envy and hatred; each held the other beneath contempt. Yet now they instinctively stood by each other's side, as if keeping some sort of order of rank – a good ways behind the sobbing Rizujlett, Eveline and Maszkerádi.

Whoa, if my good lord Pistoli were to stick his head out of the coffin now, how quickly he would pull back in! Although the faces confronting him no longer carried the least sign of blame, still, he might recall certain threats made by this or that little woman... Why, one had predicted she would tear out her rival's hair. Another promised she would only visit his grave after all

had quieted down, the feasting over, the burial mound abandoned and awaiting a few heartfelt tears.

They were all decked out as if going to some ball or wedding. Fanny Late wore two necklaces hung with gold coins; Stony Dinka sported blue flowery silk from top to toe. Even the soles of their little shoes were immaculate. They stood arms linked, proud, not one whit ashamed of having been the great dead man's affairs of the heart. From time to time they measured up the assembled company with a scornful glance. Strictly speaking they were the only ones who had a right to cry, for they were the ones nicest to Pistoli while he lived. They had not wanted anything from him, except a chance to love him. They had not taken up his precious time, robbed him of his good mood or health. Maybe they stood guilty of a thing or two, for who on earth is not guilty of one thing or another – but with regard to Pistoli, they could maintain their snow-white innocence in front of the highest heavenly tribunal. Therefore they were the pre-eminent ones here, and condolences should be addressed to them... They put their heads together and decided to hold Pistoli's wake that very night at The Rubadub. After the funeral they would notify a few older women who had been Pistoli's lovers so many years ago that they themselves had forgotten about the affair by now.

"Let me cook dinner, I know our dear departed's favourite dishes," offered Stony Dinka.

"And Kakuk should bring the Gypsies," added Fanny Late. "Let'em play once more my good man's favourite songs."

The two women warmed up to the idea of their bereavement, achieving a kind of Christmastime mood. All of life should be a feast. Even a death may have its beneficial as well as harmful aspects. Many a wake has turned into a dance.

Back in a corner of the yard stood the village poor, who had claimed only an hour or two in Pistoli's crowded life. Old peasant women dabbed kerchiefs at the corner of their eyes, and tradeswomen clad in black gossiped about the gentlefolk. The usual audience of village funerals was awaiting the performance.

At last the members of the glee club Pistoli had presided over made their entrance. Men in threadbare black suits, walrus mustaches, some lanky, some stout, and all of them flustered. There were six songsters in all, and all of them wore over their shoulders the national colours muffled with black. Their intonations were somewhat timid and uncertain, for they lacked Mr Pistoli's self-confident figure at the head of the company, leading them into battle. So they stumbled and stepped on each other's heel, and it took a considerable effort on the part of Gerzsábek, the director of funerary affairs and the sender of death notices, to settle them down on the left of the coffin. It was rather miraculous that Pistoli had lain motionless in the box all this time. When the glee club was at last installed in place, the members' necks started craning toward the open gate. For they were still without their famous basso profundo, who, in order to fortify his singing voice, had dropped in somewhere on the way for a pint. And Mayer, it appeared, was still fortifying his voice.

Meanwhile other problems had arisen.

The Catholic priest sent the sexton with a message that he would not undertake Mr Pistoli's funeral service, for the good gentleman had been an atheist from way back, having lapsed from the faith decades ago.

So what had been Pistoli's religion?

Nobody knew. Only the deceased could have told now whether he had believed in God, and if so, according to what rites had he praised the Lord. No one seemed to recall ever seeing him in church.

So the funeral would have to be held without a priest.

Eveline's sensibilities were excessively offended by the abstention of the Church.

"I'm leaving," she told Maszkerádi, and could hardly keep back her sobs.

"Stay," her friend whispered. "Gerzsábek's already sent for the vicar. A Calvinist clergyman won't refuse to bury the old reprobate."

"I am a Catholic," Eveline insisted. "I respect my religion. I cannot participate in the funeral of a heretic."

"Then go," snapped Maszkerádi. "But I'm staying to the end, even if the dogcatcher comes to bury him. Go on, I can walk home."

Eveline, shamefaced, slipped out of the yard. Her example was followed by others. Some of the old women sidled away from the coffin, as if it carried contagion. Once outside the gate, they hung around to keep an eye on the proceedings from a safe distance on the far side of the street.

But the general mood turned openly agitated after Gerzsábek returned empty-handed. Apparently the Calvinist preacher had gone to the next village for a funeral, and would not be back before nightfall. There was no other man of the cloth in the area.

Maszkerádi had to adjust the veil tighter over her face so that no one would notice her smile.

Now Fanny Late stepped up. Timid at first, she gathered her pluck and surveyed the scene.

"Ladies and gentlemen, why don't we say the Lord's Prayer. That should be enough for a soul's salvation."

"And what about the glee club?" Kakuk argued.

"Ah, the hell with'em," replied Fanny Late. "So who can recite the Lord's Prayer here without a mistake?"

Again it was Kakuk who stepped forth, determined to save some of the dignity of the occasion, as if he had been specifically instructed to do so by Mr Pistoli.

He crossed himself and began to recite the Lord's Prayer in a loud voice.

But in vain did Kakuk pilfer Pistoli's pants and jacket. The assembled company was well aware that the man leading the prayer was a common tramp. In ones and twos, women and men began to slip off. Maszkerádi and the two tavernkeepers were the last to remain. At last Fanny Late venomously hissed at the young lady:

"And how about you, pretty mask?! Why don't you, too, beat it?"

Maszkerádi shuddered. She looked the flushed woman up and down, then hurried out of the courtyard.

Quitt drove up the hearse, and now the coffin had to be hoisted. They tried levering the black wooden box with poles, but it turned out to be as heavy as if it had contained lead. The two hefty females and the two older men had a sweaty time of it hoisting Mr Pistoli up for his last carriage ride. Stony Dinka quite forgot herself and let out a couple of oaths, *sotto voce*.

"Oh, I always knew my darling carried his weight well. But I had no idea he was this heavy. He must have drunk a lot of water."

It was now around three in the afternoon.

The cloudless sky was as clear as a conscience with nothing to hide. The May sun stood high up above the earth, indifferent to the fact that a funeral was about to take place down here. But just as Quitt's cart pulled out of Pistoli's gate, a tiny little cloud appeared on the western edge of the sky. In shape it resembled a black dog cavorting on the horizon.

The cemetery was quite far from the manor. People who live in these parts prefer not to keep the dead in everyday sight. They are enough trouble showing up in your dreams, when you are defenseless against them. They enter the atrium, sit around at length in front of the cold fireplace, drink up the leftover wine on the dinner table, rest their head on their arm and their expression emanates such pain that the dreamer wakes next day to ponder: what sort of mortal sin could weigh upon the dearly beloved departed one? And all the useless lottery numbers they give! Plus they spout tales about one's jealously guarded women! They prattle about one's most painful secrets... Yes, better keep the dead far apart from the living. No one can make a living from the friendship of the dead.

So the cemetery was quite far, tucked away in a valley from where no evil waters from the malicious dead could descend upon the village, no seepage from old crones to affect the new wine. Let their tears flow into each other's graves. Most of the people lying here were related, anyway. One lived ninety years, another only thirty; no matter, they were all the same flesh and blood. Former lovers must surely get together here, regardless of what obstacles life had raised between them. Grandmothers can sneak off at night to join their beaux, no one would notice that their beds are empty. Even if the lawful husband does occupy the neighbouring grave (for old people like that

sort of thing), the aged husband would never think of asking his better half what she did in the adjacent pit all night long until cock's crow. Yes, it is a fine world, underground.

Everyone can live it up with their mate. – Why, many was the time Mr Pistoli had passed the cemetery in the course of his journeys. The trees of quietude: cypresses, willows, locusts full of crows' nests, bushes exuding their bee-intoxicating aroma, all knew him well, since the old cemetery was a most suitable place for conducting amorous trysts. The neglected, overgrown grave mounds had been long ago abandoned by the old women who visit graveyards for no reason at all. Atop Darabos (lived 80 years) or over the widow Fitkonidesz (lived 76 years, and in the meantime helped bring Mr Pistoli into the world, being a midwife) it felt oh so good to stretch out in the company of some sweet young thing, on those grave mounds, where the knobby toes and skinny arms had long ago turned into larkspur. No wonder Mr P. loved to sing the song that went: "In the graveyard, that's where I first saw your face..." On his way back from a wake (having said goodbye to a dead man), from Phtrügy (where he'd gone to taste the fresh horseradish), from a wedding (where he kept embracing the bride), or hearing Gyula Benczi play old Hungarian songs – Pistoli never failed to tip his hat and raise the wineskin in front of the cemetery's old inhabitants. "Here's to you, old buddy!" he shouted at the ancient headstones and crosses. At other times, in his cups (more than once), wrapped in his cloak he crossed the entire cemetery at midnight, curious to see if the dead would snag his coat, as they did the proverbial shoemaker's. Yes, Pistoli was well known here. Maybe one or two old drinking companions and a few bored women were already lying in wait for him.

And so they trudged onward, carting Mr Pistoli to the cemetery, to a remote corner where the solitary poplar stood, designated by the deceased as his final resting place. That's where he wanted to lie, where the wind blows the hardest, out at the far edge, all alone, as if he required something out of the ordinary even when he was six feet under. Only crows and peregrine falcons ever perched swaying on the branches of that lonesome

poplar. Though in the nighttime witches riding brooms might have landed there.

By the time the funeral procession reached the highway, that black dog had flown up from the horizon into the middle of the sky. And it shed its coat. First it turned into a bear, then into a lion, and finally into some horrific monster whose hindquarters were somewhere south in Debrecen, and its head way up near Miskolc in the north. Thunder rolled all along the vast upstairs, a rumbling giant was approaching; the wind, like some bandit, blew a sharp whistle in the fields, and hunched-over assassins rushed behind bushes and fences. The atmosphere was ominous and oppressive; the last few stragglers were hurtled like dustballs back toward the village.

Yes, most of the company had long ago dropped away from behind the hearse. No one remained, save for Kakuk and the two women, the innkeepers. The tramp felt terribly sorry for messing up his new outfit, but stuck it out. He firmly believed this was how Pistoli, from the other world, was avenging the theft of his clothes. The two women clutched on to each other. They bent and swayed in disarray, like windblown autumn sunflowers. They had already tucked up their silk skirts and taken off their shoes, while lightning, like an insane rider, lashed their still dry backs, and thunder did its work like a desperate murderer. The highway's dust rose in twisters; a few slender trees spun out of the soil with a creak, like spent dancers at a mad kermess. Leaves torn from trees flew up screeching as if imitating their avian kin. Shrubs shook crazily and grasses bristled, as if terrified by some weird sight.

The carter Quitt had not taken his pipe out of his mouth all this time. His two little horses ambled along, heads hung low.

By the time they reached the grave in the cemetery's corner, the gravediggers were gone. They had run off seeking shelter from the storm. But there rose the eternal mound by the open grave, the last stop for all of us under the sun. Last stop for rich and poor, where the loud wails ring out one last time, and the priest prays while the gravediggers solemnly hold the ropes. The sandy loam was yellow here and the pit profound. Kakuk, on peering into it, gave a terrified yelp. They say he saw Mr Pistoli standing

down there, shrouded in white head to toe, exactly as he had been when laid into his coffin. Still, there he stood, his face chalk white, his hair in his eyes, his hand reaching up for help.

After that, no one dared approach the gravepit. The sky crashed like kingdom come. The clouds howled. Kind heaven now screamed raving mad. The last escort of the dead man at last turned tail: abandoning the coffin by the open grave, they flew headlong toward the shelter of distant trees. Only the thief Kakuk could still hear behind his back Mr Pistoli's thunderous, clattering voice... Even Quitt drove off in a hurry, as if he had suddenly lost his mind.

There was a tremendous crash.

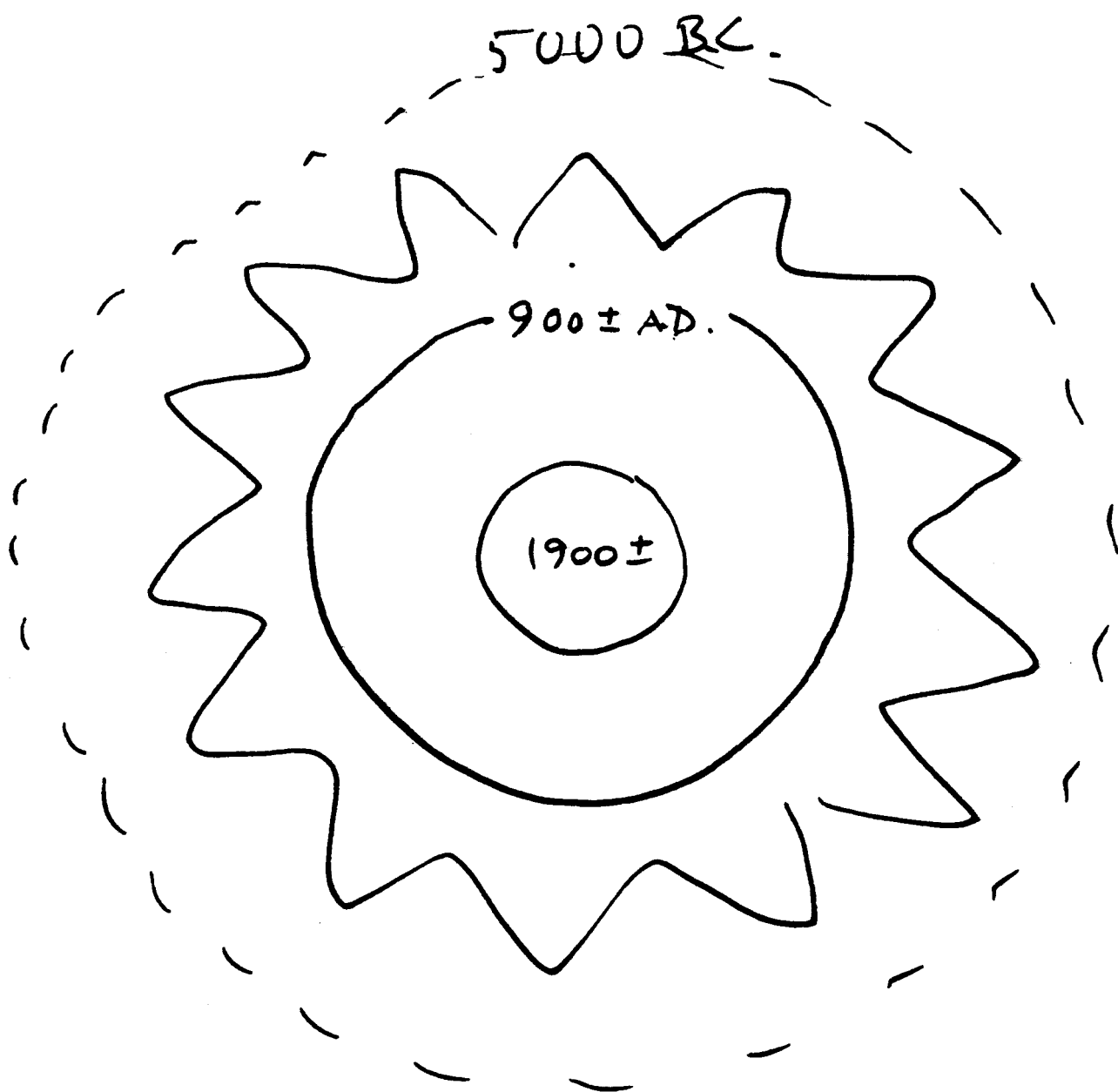
The two women looked back from the distance. The poplar in the cemetery's corner was one flaming torch. The fire flew and blew sparks, as if souls from hell were hopping around in the flames. It was blue and yellow and ghostly, that flame.

Run, run, from this place of horror.

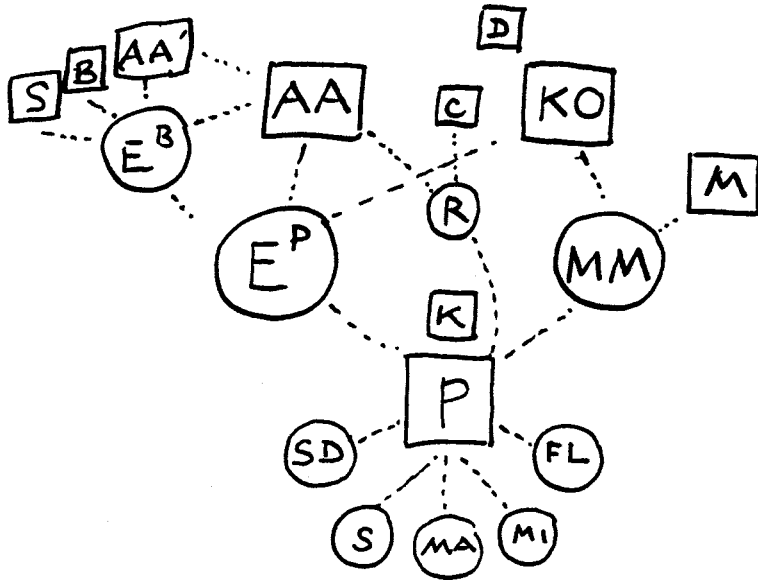
Soon after the storm broke and raged until next morning.

The next day not a trace remained of poplar, coffin, grave. Just black cinders, mixed in with the wasteland clods. Pistoli was nowhere to be seen. Only the spider spun its web in the cemetery's corner, accompanied by an occasional song blowing in the wind.

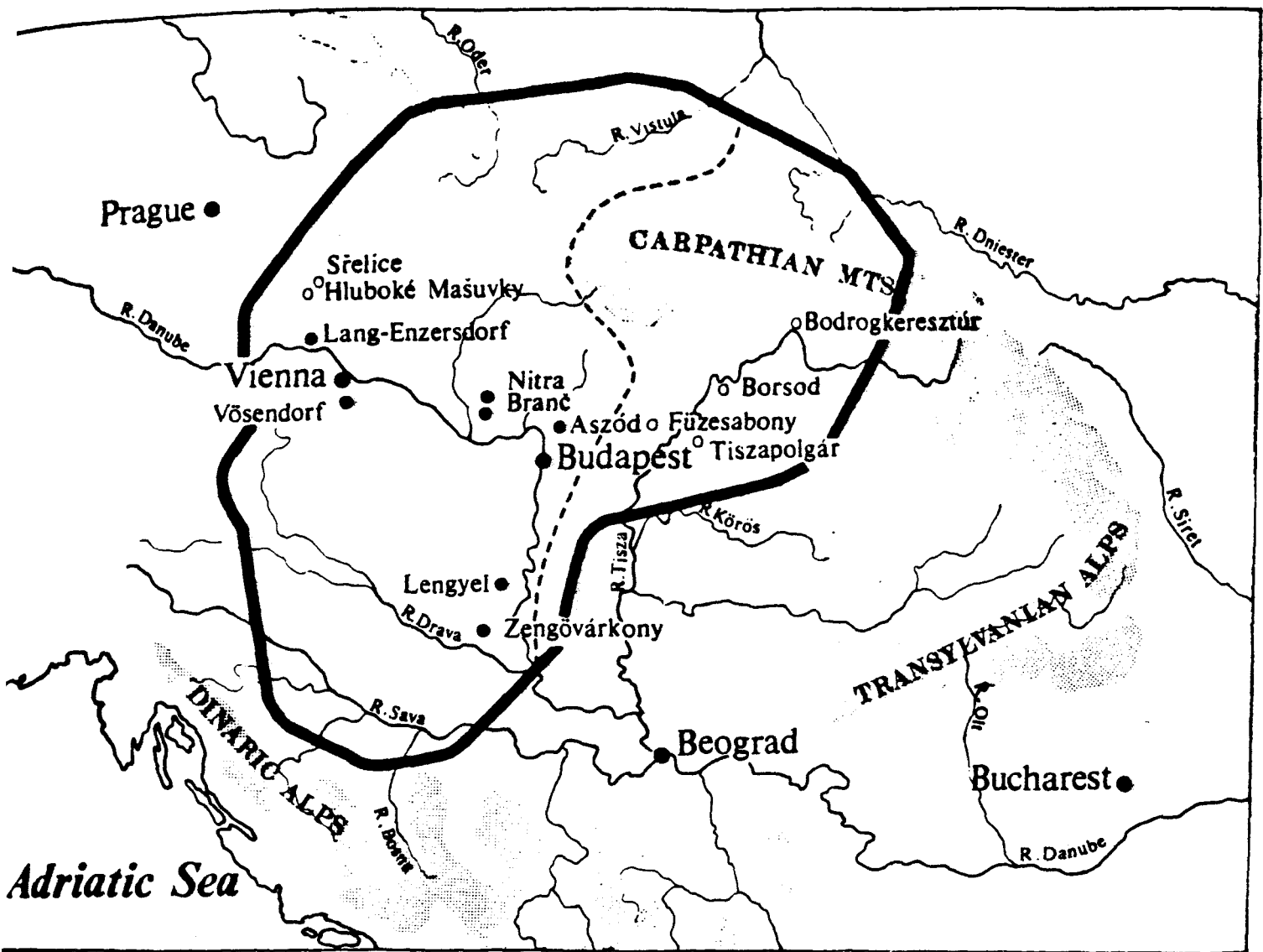
"Time-Frame" in Krúdy's *Sunflower*



The Cast of Characters in Krúdy's *Sunflower*

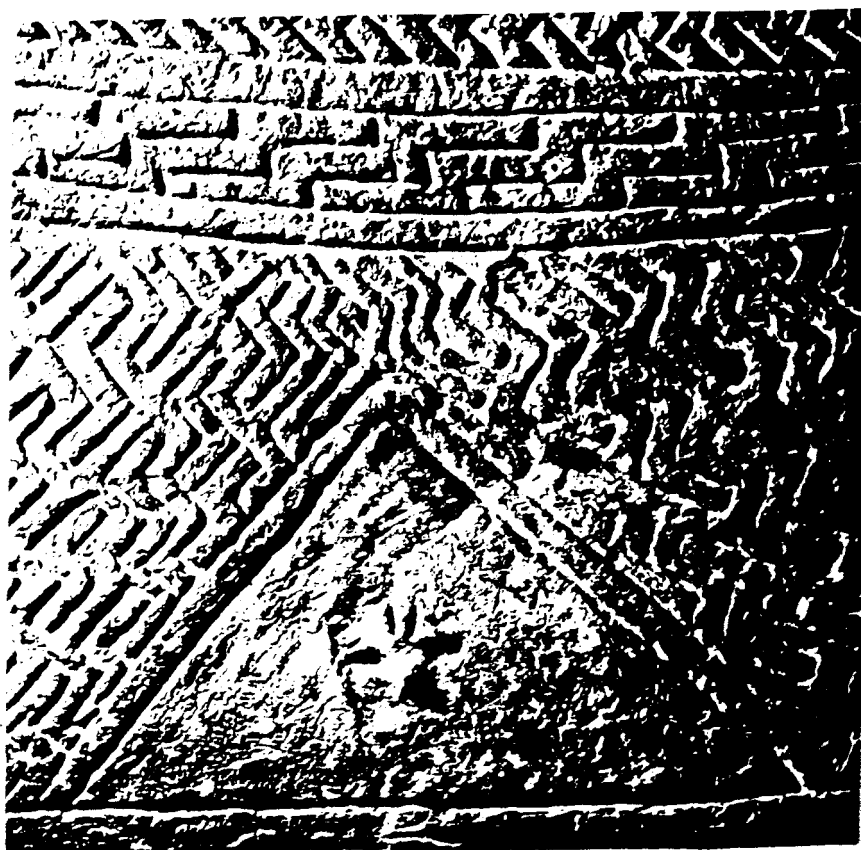
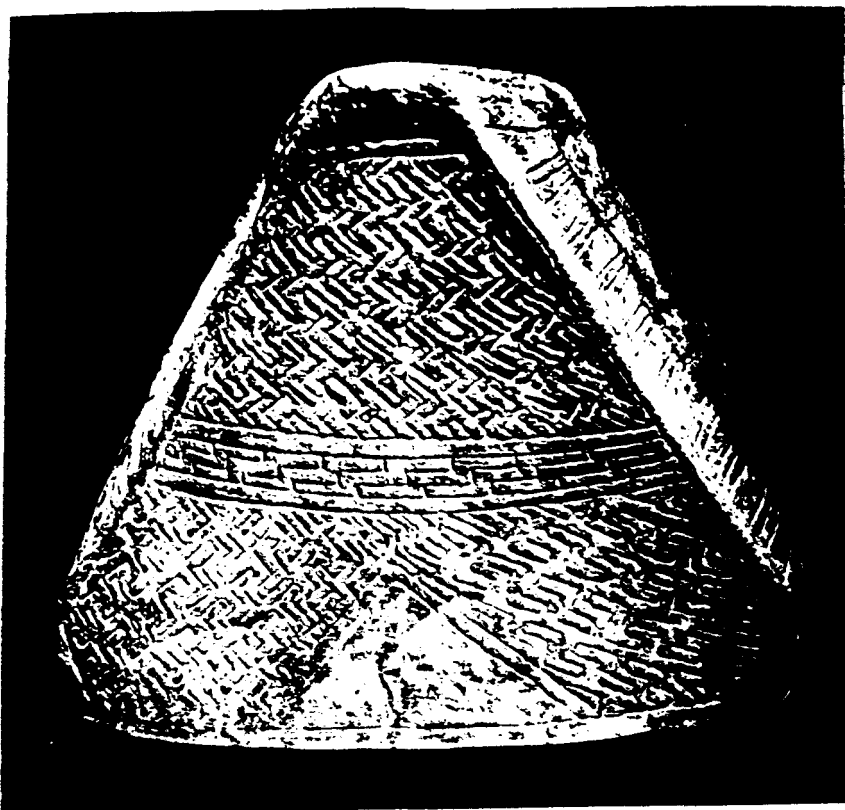


- P Pistoli
 E^P the 'palpable' Eveline
 E^B the 'bygone' Eveline
 MM Malvina Maszkerádi
 AA Andor Álmos-Dreamer
 KO Kálmán Ossuary
 SD Stony Dinka, and
 FL Fanni Late -- P's mistresses
 S Sári,
 MA Mári, and
 MI Mishlik -- P's wives
 K Kakuk
 R Rizujlett
 D Diamant
 M Maszkerádi -- MM's father
 S Sükray,
 B Burman, and
 AA' Ákos Álmos -- E^B's husbands



Map VI: Middle Danube and Tisza civilizations. Dots indicate Lengyel sites, circles Tiszapolgár sites. Fifth and early fourth millennia BC

Illustrations: Marija Gimbutas: *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*.
University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles. 1982.

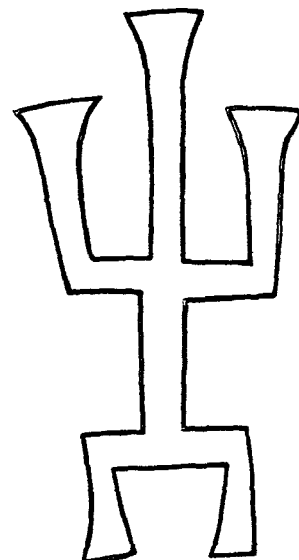


Altar depicting several spheres of the universe. It probably portrays a cosmogonical myth (birth of water divinity - horned snake?). Tisza culture, Kökénydomb, southeastern Hungary. p.130

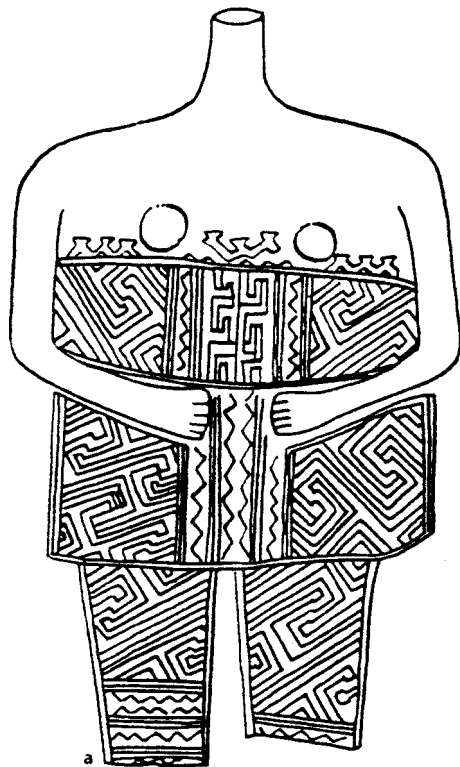


Double-headed goddess.
Early Vinča. Rastu, western
Romania. End 6th millenium
BC. p. 121.

Schematized 'Birth-giving
Goddess' engraved on a potsherd
from Borsod, northeastern
Hungary. Bükk culture. End of
sixth millenium BC. p. 177.



Illustrations: Marija Gimbutas: *The Language of the Goddess*. Harper and Row. San Francisco. 1989.



Szegvár-Tüzköves, c. 5000 BC.

This figurine is completely covered, front and back, in excision encrusted with white paste. There are chevrons on her head and throat; zig-zags representing rain streams flow down her body. Her torso is an unmodulated block except for the breasts. Bükk (Tiszadada, at Kalvinháza, NE Hungary; c. 5000 BC) H. 10 cm.

The Goddess as nourishing vessel, her head replaced by the vase. Only the arms and breasts are modeled on her torso. Early Lengyel (Sé, Szombathely, W Hungary; c 5000 BC). Reconstructed; H about 25 cm.

