SUNKEN MEMORIES AND THE DEEPER LAYERS OF REALITY:

GYULA KRÚDY AND THE SENSORY EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

Gyula Krúdy, the greatest Magyar prose writer of the twentieth century, was seventeen-years-old when he arrived in 'the Paris of the East.' Born in Nyíregyháza, in northeastern Hungary, Krúdy disobeyed his father's wishes and moved to Budapest, the then fastest-growing European city, in the summer of 1896.[1] This year was the 1000th anniversary of Hungary's foundation, and its capitol city was bursting with an electric energy and a feverish lust for life. Krúdy, not yet old enough to buy cigarettes in today's Hungary, craved the sensory experiences provided by the then largest city between Vienna and St. Petersburg, telling his father that he "shall be a poet in Budapest."[2] The city played its part and did not fail in its attempts to satiate Krúdy's sensorial needs and, much to his father's dismay, Krúdy did indeed become a poet (of the prose form) in Budapest.[3]

Budapest provided everything Krúdy needed to flourish… artistically. In the words of historian John Lukacs: "It was a grand place for literature. It was a grand place for the young Krúdy."[4] Freshly disinherited, except for a gold watch, Krúdy found himself a place in the literary bohemian café culture of the city. It was here he, at the age of twenty, met Satanella, "a pleasant, plump, literary Jewish schoolteacher,"[5] whom he quickly married. Newly wed, with the city at the tip of his pen and at the mercy of his senses, Budapest was, indeed, 'a grand place for the young Krúdy.' This turn-of-the-century metropolis with the heart of the countryside, previously a mixture of Magyars, Germans, Swabians, Greeks and Serbs, was now a

[1] Lukacs, John. Introduction to *Sunflower*. New York: New York Review of Books, 1997: viii
[2] Lukacs, Introduction: xii
[3] Krúdy's parents did not marry until he was seventeen. His mother was a maid for the aristocratic Krúdy family. His father was a lawyer, who insisted his son pursue the same career.
[4] Lukacs, Introduction: xii
[5] Lukacs, Introduction: xi

place where, according to Lukacs, "everyone, including the considerable number of Jews, spoke and sang, ate and drank, *thought* and *dreamt* in Hungarian", an ancient language "reconstructed and enriched with infinite care, sometimes haltingly, by the patriot writers and classicists of the early nineteenth century," who made the vocabulary "rich, muscular, flexible and declarative, lyrical and telling."[6] It was here, in Budapest, that Krúdy would master this magnificent, lonesome language and, in doing so; provide his readers with sensory experiences otherwise outside their realm of everyday, sober consciousness. Yet, all the same, these experiences were also incredibly *real*, portraying the depth of human psychology and sensory experience in ways the psychoanalysts of the time could not.

Concerning the Translation of Krúdy's Prose

Perhaps here is as good a time as any to pause and briefly address the issue of Krúdy's translatability, since we are obviously dealing with English translations, and this paper is intended for the broader English-speaking audience who is likely unfamiliar with both Krúdy and his native-tongue. It is undoubtedly more difficult to translate Krúdy's prose than that of his contemporaries, which shouldn't come as a surprise to the uninitiated reader upon their first encounter with the author. Not only is Krúdy's prose rendered difficult to translate by the unique quality of the Hungarian language and its being unrelated to the other great European languages, but also by the fact that, as asserted by Lukacs, "Krúdy is a *deeply* Hungarian writer."[7] According to Lukacs, "[Krúdy's] prose is poetic, and profoundly national, soaked with history, with images, associations, including not only words but rhythms recognizable only to

[6] Lukacs, Introduction: xi. Italics are mine.
[7] Lukacs, Introduction: xxx. Italics are not mine.

Hungarians, and among them only to those whose imaginative antennae naturally vibrate not only with such words and their sounds but with what those descriptions historically – yes, historically – represent."[8]

What Lukacs says is entirely true, though I must disagree with his answer to the question: "How can a foreign reader understand...?" "Hopeless," Lukacs answers. "Hopeless. Still...go ahead and try, my friends."[9] And try we will, as to understand Krúdy in translation is certainly not a hopeless endeavor. In fact, when I first read John Bátki's translation of *Sunflower* years ago, it read to me, stylistically, like Virginia Woolf, which Lukacs himself even notes is a valid stylistic comparison.[10] Bátki's translation is fantastic, and the trained literary scholar, or practiced reader of fine literature, should have little problem unpacking the brilliant prose.[11]

Is the text better in its original Hungarian? Certainly. Does the same truth apply for all translated literature, of any language? Absolutely. However, to claim, as Lukacs does, that the non-Hungarian reader cannot understand Krúdy is to deny the rest of the world one of the greatest European prose writers of the twentieth century. Thus, on that note, let us continue to explore the sensory world of the sensational Magyar writer.

The Fresh Winter Scent and Self-Analysis

Krúdy's world is, unlike his contemporary Zsigmond Móricz's (a great Hungarian novelist of realist prose), one where even the slightest stimulation of the senses forces the individual

[8] Lukacs, Introduction: xxx-xxxi

[9] Lukacs, Introduction: xxxi

[10] Lukacs, Introduction: xxx

[11] None of the translated prose provided is my own. All of the translated prose in this essay is copied directly from Bátki and Lukacs, who provide significantly more authentic translations than my own.

down a rabbit-hole of *conscious* mental processes. Take, for example, the following passage from the first chapter of his 1918 serialized novel *Sunflower* (*Napraforgó*):

> Mr. Álmos-Dreamer brought into the house a *fresh winter scent* that smacked the plain everyday life and prompted one to quickly confess everything – sins, diseases, meanness, weakness, desperation and bitterness – rapidly reel off one thing after the other, to be absolved as quickly as possible, so that refreshed, reformed and bathed clean, one might turn a new leaf, and launch upon a carefree, openly selfish, relaxed and ordinary life. It meant leaving behind forever the curses of civilized life, its soulless pleasures, exotic agonies and neurotic dances. It meant pulling on a pair of peasant boots, biting into a garlic sausage, and joining the washerwomen on the frozen river by the hole cut into the ice; it meant lugging grimy little kids in a knapsack on one's back. It meant eating plenty and squatting on the snow like the nomadic Gypsy women who can run like gazelles, and give birth and die in birch groves, where crows congregate.[12]

This passage exemplifies the sensory experience that is Krúdy's perceptive world. Anyone who grew up in the countryside can understand, or perhaps even precisely remember, the smell of fresh snow on outdoor winter attire. Here, however, this "fresh winter scent," as portrayed by Krúdy, 'smacks' one (in this case, the protagonist Eveline) into the rather serious, self-analyzing act of confession – not only of one's sins, but also of one's negative traits, such as meanness, weakness, desperation and bitterness.

It is not easy for the individual to examine and analyze one's self, but here this self-analysis is done in order to cure one's anxieties and remove one's guilt, in order to *feel* "refreshed, reformed and bathed clean." This confession of one's faults allows for a better life, removed from the "soulless pleasures, exotic agonies and neurotic dances" of "civilized," class-oriented life. It also allows one to symbolically 'get back to nature' by conjuring both the texture and flavor of garlic sausage, as well as the acts of giving birth and dying in birch groves by, not unimportantly, "nomadic Gypsy women." All of this – the desire to confess; the self-

[12] Krúdy, Gyula. *Sunflower*. Translated by John Bátki. New York: New York Review of Books, 1997: 15-16. Italics are mine.

analysis; the acknowledgement of one's faults; the desire for a guilt-free and natural, uncivilized existence; the Gypsy women; the crows; the garlic sausage – is brought upon by one simple sensorial stimulus: a "fresh winter scent" brought indoors by one character of Krúdy's world.

Addiction, Budapest, and a Heightened Sense of Things

Krúdy was an addict, and he wrote almost entirely to sustain his addictions. His vices of choice were wine, women and gambling – particularly cards and horses – and, in all cases, "it was his custom to choose outsiders."[13] According to Lukacs, Krúdy was prone to scribbling sixteen pages of prose, after a long night of drinking and gambling, before walking to an editorial office to receive his honorarium. He would then enjoy a nice, "long midday dinner, well after the noon hour, in a half empty restaurant," before taking advantage of all the Budapest night life had to offer: gambling, wine and women. "By midnight," writes Lukacs, "he would have little or no money left."[14] This was typical of Krúdy's everyday adult life, up until the day he died, alone, in his apartment, with his electricity cut-off and not a *pengő* to his name.[15]

It was Krúdy's addiction to pleasurable sensorial experiences that heightened the quality of his writing and infused it with acute sensorial descriptions. In the atmosphere of Pest, Krúdy did not merely see "the blue-white towers and the endlessly rising roofs".[16] He viewed Pest as a town that had "never been agreeable", but "*desirable*, yes: like a racy, full-blooded young married woman about whose flirtations everyone knows and yet gentlemen are glad to bend

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[13] Lukacs, Introduction: xv
[14] Lukacs, Introduction: xix
[15] Lukacs, Introduction: xxiv-xxv
[16] Lukacs, John. *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture*. New York: Grove Press, 1988: 21

down and kiss her hand."[17] Budapest smelled to him "of violets in the spring," and he heard Buda's autumnal tones: "the odd thud of chestnuts dropping on the Castle walk; fragments of the music of the military band from the kiosk on the other side wafting over in the forlorn silence."[18] The sights, sounds and smells of Budapest were not mere stimuli to Krúdy. His senses were fine-tuned to absorb the very essence of human existence, which he did not keep to himself -- his readers often found themselves addicted to the magic-infused amphetamine that was Krúdy's prose, in the same way Krúdy found himself addicted to pleasures of the senses.[19]

In the streets of Budapest, Krúdy did not merely admire the women, who were already then somewhat famous abroad. He absorbed the very essence of their presence. He wrote:

> Women smelled like oranges in Japan. Rákóczi Avenue was full of women of doubtful repute; yet they were pretty and young enough to be princesses in Berlin. Around the Emke coffeehouse stiff lieutenants and fake country gentlemen kept reviewing them. . . . The youngest girls wore silk stockings, and white-haired women found their own brand of connoisseurs. The city was blessed with its cult of women. The eyes of men trembled, the women were so beautiful: black-haired ones, as if they had come from Seville, and in the tresses of the blond ones tales from an Eastern sun were playing hide-and-seek, like fireflies in the summer meadows.[20]

In this passage, we can clearly see Krúdy's finely-tuned awareness of the present. To him, the beautiful women on the street did not merely smell 'nice.' Instead, he noted the pleasurable, distinct fragrance of Japanese oranges (though I am quite positive he never traveled to Japan). He describes not only the women's clothing, but also those men admiring the princess-like beauties, illustrating a total awareness of the public environment. His sense of sight trembles,

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[17] Lukacs, *Budapest 1900*: 21. Italics are mine.
[18] Lukacs, *Budapest 1900*: 10
[19] It is worth noting that he was not always popular. Widespread popularity came only after he rediscovery of his work, well after his death.
[20] Lukacs, *Budapest 1900*: 23

provoking deeply personal fantasies of the exotic East, playful fireflies and summer meadows. Krúdy's mastery of his sensorial input allows the reader to not only venture back to the exciting Budapest of the early twentieth century, but to experience the city on a psychic level.

Walking In Awareness through the Layers of Consciousness

Though obviously present in reality, Krúdy almost continually existed on another plane of reality; what one may call the 'dream world,' in which tales from an Eastern sun play hide-and-seek. Though physically occupying the present, Krúdy was not a*ctually* "a part of the present", as noted by historian Péter Hanák.[21] "Deep down in-side", writes Hanák, "Krúdy was an outsider, just as his dreamy and erotic characters were. He lived in a dream world transposed to the past, or rather a world of dreams created by the waking imagination, of visions."[22] Perhaps brought on by his frequent consumption of both local and *Tokay* wine, Krúdy existed, simultaneously, in two realities: the physical present and the interior dream – the latter a product of the sensory stimulations provided by the former.

To Krúdy, an awareness of the present meant not only noting the details and 'collecting the pennies' offered by Nature, but also transcending the present into a deeper, interior reality of the conscious mind. In the words of Hanák, "[the] present to [Krúdy] was merely a backdrop, a surface from which gradually rose the ever more luring and *realistic* layers of a sunken past, as rapture comes to an opium smoker",[23] or, perhaps more fitting in this case, to a wine connoisseur. For Krúdy, simply living in total awareness of the present was not a complete

[21] Hanák, Péter. *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998: 91
[22] Hanák, 1998: 91
[23] Hanák, 1998: 91-92. Italics are mine.

picture. What was needed, in order to complete the whole, was an awareness of the deeper layers of one's individual reality.

According to Hanák ,"[the] dream existence needs no interpretation because it is *the natural world*, compared to which waking demands relief from endless neuroses"[24], or, as Lukacs claims is the Hungarian case, *psychosis*.[25] The Hungarian mind, which Krúdy exemplifies, "is very observant and sensitive to every psychic nuance," writes Lukacs, who also correctly claims, "[It] tends to recognize these from expressions of the *conscious* mind."[26] This fact is clearly illustrated in Krúdy's prose, where physical environments and their stimuli take one down a path of deeply personal, internal dreams. As for the need to find relief from the waking reality, Krúdy sought this through sustained exposure to his favorite pleasures.

Excursions and a Prolonged Alteration of the Senses

Krúdy preferred the often-dark world of dreams. His naturally and artificially heightened senses created prose seemingly written, states translator John Bátki, "in a trance state, weaving webs of images that, upon reflection, astonish as evocations of the oft-forgotten Great Goddess of the Old World, as old as the soul of the soil."[27] Krúdy would, in fact, put himself into a state of pleasure-induced trance before fiendishly writing some of his most remarkable prose. Lukacs describes times when Krúdy would "corral a companion, [...] board the Vienna express, sit down in the dining car," get off "[when] their money or the wine ran out," then "wire one of his

[24] Hanák, 1998: 91-92. Italics are mine.
[25] Lukacs, *Budapest 1900*: 25
[26] Lukacs, *Budapest 1900*: 25 Italics are mine.
[27] Bátki, John. "Woman as Goddess in Krúdy's *Sunflower*." John Bátki. Last modified April 14, 2014. http://johnbatki.com/woman-goddess-krudys-sunflower.

editors for an advance and return to the city in a day or so."[28] Other times he would make four-day trips around Lake Balaton, "with stops at the taverns and the garden restaurants", after which "he would order paper and ink, and in the empty restaurants [...] write twelve or sixteen pages of magical, dream-haunted prose, sometimes about lonely travelers."[29]

Said prose, such as *The Traveling Companion* (*Az útitárs*), is rich with Krúdy's specific brand of magic, produced by his excursions of sensory experience:

> We were traveling in the moonlight; through the shimmering fields ran those invisible foxes who by some magic elude the hunters; wild ducks flew at a distance above a pond breathing silver; the shadows of trees moved like heartbeats . . . Like sadness, rain reached and overtook us, and from the darkening night it beat strings of tears against the indifferent window . . . and now only the words of my traveling companion echoed around me, as if Death were reading the Scriptures.[30]

Krúdy's dream world was one inhabited by ghost-like foxes (and many other ghosts); where ponds did not merely reflect the moonlight, but exhale its silver beams. The very trees themselves psychedelically breathe, proven by the regular movements of their shadows. Here, sadness, an inescapable human emotion, catches up to Krúdy, in the form of a rainstorm, though unfeeling windows protect him. Krúdy's trance, brought on by sensory overload, is so deep that his companion sounds like "Death [...] reading the Scriptures."

Krúdy's wine-soaked excursion of the senses creates a world that is not only surreal, but also a very *real* depiction of human psychology, and the overall human experience. Though obviously different from his previous description of the women on the streets of Budapest, the countryside he travels through is very much the same physical reality. In instances such as this, Krúdy is simply deeper into reality's dream world; a state arrived at through the assistance of

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[28] Lukacs, Introduction: xv-xvi
[29] Lukacs, Introduction: xvi
[30] Lukacs, Introduction: xvi

wine and pleasurable sensory experiences. In both instances, Krúdy is able to locate his awareness in a deeper reality, though in neither instance does he write of the subconscious. Quite the opposite, he pens a very *conscious* reflection of reality.

Skepticism and Distrust towards Freud's Psychoanalysis

Given Krúdy's preference for dreams, one might be tempted to assume that Krúdy was, to some degree, influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. Krúdy was certainly aware of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalysis. In fact, according to Gabriella Szenderák, Krúdy knew Freud's work quite well, and he regularly met Sándor Ferenczi, Hungarian psychoanalyst and close associate of Freud, in the years preceding the First World War.[31] Additionally, Krúdy was a frequent "member of [Ferenczi's] dinner table in the restaurant Royal", where intellectual topics were almost certainly discussed.[32]

However, there is little evidence to suggest that Krúdy truly found Freud's work interesting or influential on a personal level, as "the direct impact of psychoanalysis [can only be found] in a few spaces of his collected works", and he usually "delineated psychoanalysts and the details of […] psychoanalytic therapy in an ironic way."[33] One may even go so far as to claim that Krúdy was mistrustful of psychoanalysts. Szenderák provides two examples to support this claim: the narrator's mistrust of psychoanalysis in *Purgatory* (*Purgatórium*), and "the famous *Álmoskönyv* (*Dream Book*) and it's connected publications (mainly the permanent heading *"What did you dream about, dear?"* in the magazine *Theatre Life*, where Krúdy

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[31] Szenderák, Gabriella. "Gyula Krúdy and the Psychoanalysis." *Budapesti Gazdasági Főiskola - Magyar Tudomány Napja* (2007): 445-452. Accessed March 28, 2016. http://elib.kkf.hu/okt_publ/tek_2007_40.pdf: 446
[32] Szenderák, 2007: 446
[33] Szenderák, 2007: 446

analyzed the dreamer's dreams as a dilettante)" in an ironic fashion.[34] Later in this paper, we will see another example of his psychoanalytic skepticism.

The relationship between Krúdy's prose and psychoanalysis is minimal. "The most important connection between Krúdy and psychoanalysis", writes Szenderák, "is that Krúdy, especially in the mature period of his prose, [shaped] a special language and style which fits [into] psychoanalysis' conception about [the] human being and its emotional life."[35] However, it is imperative to assert, "that this is not a purposive illustration of Freud's contemporary doctrines, [but rather] an analogy between [the] two of them."[36] In this way, we can understand why one might be tempted to search for the deeper connections between Krúdy and psychoanalysis. However, such an inquiry would likely not yield any particularly interesting results, as Krúdy's special brand of prose runs parallel to, rather than intersects, the psychoanalysis of the time.

The Still Living Fragrances of Memory

Though he probably never cared much for Freud or the psychoanalysis of the age, as he cared little for his formal education, Krúdy understood everything he needed to know about the human psychology. According to Lukacs, "[Krúdy] knew something that the psychiatrists of this century [did] not yet know, which [was] that in our dreams we really do not think differently, we merely remember differently."[37] His pen was fueled by "the memories of the few, very few, years of his brief adolescence. He traced the still visible path of sunken memories: *the still living*

[34] Szenderák, 2007: 446-447
[35] Szenderák, 2007: 449
[36] Szenderák, 2007: 449
[37] Lukacs, Introduction: xii

fragrances, colors, shapes, clouds of the past."[38] Writes Lukacs: "The way he wrote at the age of twenty-five reveals something astonishing to anyone who is interested not only in writing but in the mysterious alchemy of the human heart: he knew everything about [...] autumn in the spring of his life."[39]

Lukacs is absolutely right. Not only was Krúdy able to reach a deeper understanding of the human consciousness, but he also had the spectacular ability to conjure the dream-like memories of one's life. In literary terms, as noted by Lóránt Czigány, "[Krúdy's] sentences contain a profusion of subordinate clauses [...] inviting the participation of the reader in the world evoked by his narrative, where one set of associations leads to another in both writer and reader; the latter is taken down paths of memory where he can explore strange, nostalgic sensations in hidden corners, or re-live his own past, though fragmentarily and momentarily, in the continuous present".[40] This is, perhaps, one reason why Krúdy ultimately found more widespread popularity. Not only does he take the reader down the path of a character's memory, but he also provokes the reader's personal memories to show themselves, as well, making us a deeper part of the experience.

Let us examine one example of this. "Eveline's smile", writes Krúdy in *Sunflower*, "was hopeful, evoking childhood Christmas bells and carolers." He continues:

> It was wintertime. They would go sledding . . . and skating in the bright high noon sun on the frozen Tisza flats . . . and there would be a pig-sticking . . . The mailman would deliver books still smelling of snow, frozen magazines and Christmas supplements somewhat the worse for the wear after the long journey, and together they would browse through these . . . They could [. . .] talk about their dead parents, and old

[38] Lukacs, Introduction: xii. Italics are mine.
[39] Lukacs, Introduction: xii
[40] Czigány, Lóránt. *A History of Hungarian Literature: From the Earliest Times to the Mid-1970's*. Digital Library of Hungarian Studies: 1986. Accessed March 28, 2016. http://mek.niif.hu/02000/02042/html/37.html

> friends who had passed on, women who had danced away their lives, and the mysteries of the City. The watchdogs would bark non-stop – perhaps it is the Grim Reaper himself flying above the landscape, passing over the blizzard-wrapped old manor house where pillows exude the faint scent of floral cachets and *the dream book offers the right solution to one's dreams*.[41] Check the calendar, what day is it? The fragrance of Yuletide and New Year's season creates those reveries of an ever-hopeful childhood, when faded schoolbooks that we had practically absorbed by heart, and stern old schoolmasters who seem menacing even when viewed through the spectacles of dream still provided us with a gossamer film of happy expectation . . . that had absolutely nothing to do with life to come.[42]

To Krúdy, there was no subconscious. Memory was a product of the conscious mind, and Krúdy "[traces] the still visible path of sunken memories" like his contemporaries could not. Eveline's conscious thoughts, as well as our own, meander down this path, going deeper and deeper into the depths of past experiences. Here the senses reign supreme: the *smell* of the snow, the *scent* of the pillows; the *feel* of the frozen magazines; the *sounds* of the conversations and the barking watchdogs; the *sight* of the faded schoolbooks. Nor are emotions neglected. Eveline remembers the *excitement* of checking the calendar. She also remembers the schoolmasters, who were so menacing; they remain so "through the spectacles of dream." She remembers the *fear* of the nighttime – something she still struggles with as an adult. By allowing us a window into Eveline's mind, Krúdy displays the conscious nature of losing one's self in memory. At the same time, he forces us, even if we do not initially realize it, to relive some of our own childhood, wintertime memories.

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[41] Note the sarcastic reference to dream analysis, as discussed earlier. Italics are mine.

[42] Krúdy, *Sunflower*: 10. Italics are mine.

Conclusion

Krúdy understood the psychology of the human being in ways the psychoanalysts of the time did not. Perhaps he even understood human psychology better than the psychoanalysts, altogether, though the language through which he expressed it was often dismissed, for a good amount of time, as mere 'dreamy prose.' It wasn't until the later half of the twentieth century that his prose was recognized for the truly masterful qualities it contains; one such being the ability to allow the reader to simultaneously journey through both a character's and their own memories.

Krúdy wrote realism, though not in the traditional fashion. Móricz was and is the Magyar master of traditional realism. Krúdy, however, wrote realism of a different variety. His brand is about the reality of the human mind, and the dreamy layers, accessible through sensory awareness, underlying the surface of reality. Krúdy was able to take one sensory stimulus, such as a fresh winter scent, and invoke complicated and personal moments of self-analysis. His addiction to sensory pleasures lead to both his personal and financial destruction, while allowing him to maintain altered states of consciousness, which facilitated his creative process. He was able to tune himself to a heightened awareness of the environment around him, conjuring the dream-like qualities of reality and sharing them with his readers. He understood the psychology of memory at its very core, while provoking us to do the same. Simply put, no Hungarian, nor perhaps any European, author understood the reality of the human experience deeper than Gyula Krúdy.

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