

John Lukacs

The Chronicler and the Historian

It is a truth NOT universally acknowledged that the novelist and the historian deal with much of the same matter. Or, to put it differently: that every novelist is a historian by nature, while he is a novelist by choice. The novel—unlike the epic, or the drama, or the lyric—is not an original literary form. Notwithstanding its occasional forerunners, the novel appeared in the eighteenth century in England and Europe—at the same time as the professional and “scientific” study of history began (and 250 years later it may have run its course, while the writing of history goes on). During their parallel but separate evolution the nineteenth-century appearance of the historical novel was but another, now perhaps also closing, chapter. But what some of us recognize now is that their nature is not separate but overlapping. For the instrument of the novelist and of the historian is the same: everyday language; a prose for the purposes of a narrative. Their subjects, too, are the same: the description of people and of places with whom (unlike in the mythical or heroic verse epic) we can identify. That “fiction” and “nonfiction” are not entirely the airtight and separate categories we have learned to know. In this erosion of a once definite boundary there are all kinds of dangers for the future of history, since the historian, unlike the novelist, must not and cannot invent people (and events), no matter how plausible. At the same time he ought to recognize that there is rich material for him in many a novel; that the novelist’s eye may see things that may elude the sight of the historian (and not only the pedantic members of his tribe). Maupassant once wrote that the aim of the realistic novelist “is not to tell a story; to amuse us or to appeal to our feelings, but to compel us to reflect, and to understand the darker and deeper meaning of events”—and of people, men and women. Both his eye and his hand must be deft: ergo Flaubert’s classic desideratum, the *mot juste*. Which is where a master of language such as Gyula Krúdy enters.

Few people, if any, think of Krúdy as a historian. Many do not think of him as a novelist either: rather as a unique, perhaps unsurpassable, master of prose. No use to argue the latter back and forth—in part because Krúdy can-

not be categorized. But, alas, almost all professional historians writing about the Hungary and Budapest of Krúdy's lifetime have, by and large, ignored his contributions to the history of that period, to their loss. I said something about this in 1983 when, for the first time after my emigration from Hungary, I was invited to give a talk at the Historical Institute in Buda, where I chose "History-writing and Novel-writing" as my topic ["Történetírás és regényírás: a múlt étvágya és íze." Published in *Történelmi Szemle* XXVIII, 2, 1985]—three years before my essay on Krúdy appeared in *The New Yorker*. I said that my historian colleagues ought to give some consideration to some of the writings of Hungarian novelists such as, say, Krúdy or Kosztolányi. Yet that was not the place or the occasion to expatiate upon the nature and the essence of Krúdy's *historianship*. Now, at John Bátki's invitation, the time has come to say some things about *that*.

To begin with: Gyula Krúdy was deeply conservative and a traditionalist. He had a great, and abiding, respect (more: a love) for old standards, old customs, older people. (His favorite season, as he himself often wrote, was autumn—and after that, winter.) He had—there was a duality in his personal life, as there is in the lives and minds of most people—a nostalgic, almost hopeless, and surely a melancholy longing for an older Hungarian way of life that was no longer his: of bright mornings in small country houses, with the odor of freshly ironed linen (let me add that *his* personal linen was always immaculately clean, even during long alcohol-ridden nights), of fresh butter shining atop a layer of green leaves; of old cupboards, old papers, old paintings, their scents and their contents. And let me go a step further: *le style c'était cet homme*. He adored the Hungarian Biedermeier, even though there was nothing very Biedermeier in his personal life. His style was not old-fashioned—except in the near-fantastic treasure of his knowledge and employment of ancient Hungarian words (especially of much of the Hungarian fauna and flora) and sometimes of older Hungarian verbs and their conjugations. Was he, then, a *modern* Hungarian writer? Yes and no—or, more precisely, more no than yes. His style was surely not traditional. It was inimitable and startlingly novel; but it was not really modern either. That is why, in the essay about Krúdy mentioned above, I dared to say that he was greater than Proust: because he was more than a chronicler of society and more than an analyst of human nature; because, unlike Proust, his writing was saturated with history as much as, if not more than, with sociography. Among the other

values of his jewel-laden writing Krúdy was the Homer of a now forever sunken Hungarian past; and, unlike Homer, even when his scenes were mystical, they were not mythical but real.

He wrote about people and places that really existed. In the earlier phase of his writing he wrote, at times, about very old, medieval people and places; his imaginative power made them alive and real. But this is not what the present collection is about. When, after about 1910 or 1911, he began to write more and more about Budapest, he became a chronicler of the people and places that he knew. Like every first-class writer he wrote about men and women and things that he knew and understood: and both the quantity of his knowledge and the qualities of his understanding were immense—but in his case his intuitive understanding was not simply the result of accumulated knowledge: as Pascal had said about mankind at large, he understood even more than what he knew. His portraits of Hungarian political personages (mostly of the 1880 to 1920 period, and also of Francis Joseph) are not only superbly written—they deserve to be studied and pondered by historians. (It is at least interesting that he seldom wrote much about other writers and that there is practically no literary criticism by him.) Because of the obviously limited, or nonexistent, interest of non-Hungarian readers in these people, Bátky has had to limit the number included in this volume. But what belongs here, too, is his essayistic description of places, mostly in Budapest, and of their atmosphere, at a certain historical time: another treasure-trove for historians of a particular city and period. The scents and the colors are all there in his details: their evocations arise instantly in the reader's eyes, ears, and, yes, also in his nostrils. This is how Krúdy was more than a "chronicler" (though he would have been satisfied with such a designation); he had all the makings—the knowledge and the talent—of an analytical historian.

As he became older his interest in history, reaching further and further back into Hungary's past, grew. During the last decade of his life more and more of his articles dealt with historical personages. We know too, from his mention of them in his writings, that he read, avidly and with admiration, writers such as Carlyle and Thackeray—the former's book about the French Revolution and the latter's small masterpiece on the four Georges—in Hungarian, of course, since Krúdy knew no English, nor indeed any foreign language. (His favorite author was Dickens.) The mention of Carlyle and Thackeray should suggest, too, Krúdy's inherent understanding of the inevitable connections

between literature and history, since neither of these two were professional historians. But it is not only that historians read (or ought to have read) them with profit. They, like Krúdy, were attracted by the deeper meaning of historical people and places and events: as the French critic Émile Faguet once wrote about Tocqueville, they peered under the surface, to understand the often hidden character of movements,

Krúdy was compelled to write; and while on one level he felt like writing more and more about history, on the practical level of his life he had to turn out more and more articles, often day after day, for different Budapest newspapers, fleeing from his innumerable debts. That was the reason why he became largely ignored and was forgotten by most people during the last decade of his life: he wrote too much; he was no longer interesting; he was passé. Such a depreciation we no longer share. Ever since 1940 his reputation has risen, again and again. Whether the "historian" Krúdy will be appreciated as is Krúdy the "novelist" remains questionable. It may be enough for us to state that he does not accurately fit into either of these categories, whether overlapping or not. He was *sui generis* a great writer, until the end.

The particular qualities of Krúdy's historianship are threefold. There are his descriptive powers; his insight; and his historical sense. Or, in other words: the genius of his eye; of his heart; and of his mind. His descriptive powers are the same whether he writes novels or essays or chronicles; and, as with all great writers, his *mots justes* are not only there in his adjectives and adverbs but also in his verbs and nouns. His insights are those of a startlingly profound wisdom about human nature (which, of course, is an indispensable requirement for any historian worth his profession)—and they are insights even about men and women whom he did not intimately know, but no matter. To this let me add two other qualities. One is his generous, often magnanimous, kindness. This secretive and introvert man, who could sit for long hours in company and remain silent and who had plenty of bitterness in his life, wrote about men and women with understanding and forgiveness, with occasional irony but without sarcasm. Without sharply focusing on their shortcomings and faults, his portraits sing softly, with his unsurpassable melancholy music, full of harmonies, impressionistic, as in a chromatic and chord-laden key. And their world, and his world, are sinking, if not altogether sunk: a world where the high and highest classes still counted: the end of the aristocratic age (*az úri világ*) in Hungarian history, and indeed in European

history. His respect and reverence for the aristocracy is devoid of snobbism or of snobbery: again and again he *understands*. Finally—in order but not in importance—there is Krúdy’s astonishing comprehension of the largest and deepest movements of history. One stunning example of this may be found in his article about Russia, written but a few days after the March Revolution of 1917. “The European revolutions (when such were still imaginable, and even if politely middle class) ploughed deeper beneath the topsoil of the histories of nations than the present skirmish in Russia...” After this tsar a new kind of tsar would be coming; and the eternally passive Russian masses would go on to live and suffer, as is their wont. He thus foretold Stalin, way beyond Kerensky or Lenin, years before anyone would hear the former’s name. (Would he have understood Hitler? We cannot tell—Krúdy died in May 1933, at the very time when that extraordinary man had come to power.) In this sense Krúdy exemplified yet another astonishing quality, apparent only here and there in the words of the greatest poets of mankind: the genius of a prophet. But, like the greatest historians of mankind, he was essentially a Prophet of a Past...