Introduction

It is a considerable achievement to have turned yourself into a literary cult, to have your name associated not only with particular districts of your capital city but with an entire mode of feeling. In Hungary, the terms 'Krúdyesque' and 'the world of Krúdy' have a currency which extends beyond books and conjures an experience comprised of the nostalgic, the fantastic and the ironic. It is even more remarkable that this experience should be conveyed in a literary style that anticipates both 'stream of consciousness' modernism and the magic realism of contemporary Latin American writers. Krúdy's work, in other words, is both of its time and outside it. It encapsulates a passing world of manners but turns it into illusion and establishes that illusion as a form of sensibility. In so doing it accomplishes a quiet revolution that opens the possibilities of narrative without ever appearing unnatural.

Gyula Krúdy was born in 1878, in Nyíregyháza, one of the bigger towns in eastern Hungary at the foot of the Carpathian mountains. The name of the town suggests birches (*nyír* means birch) and the whole area is known as the birch country. Krúdy's family was Catholic, and his father, a lawyer, was a member of the local minor

gentry. The author was born in the old family house, but the household wasn't entirely conventional as his father lived with a common-law wife whom he married only at the end of his life. (His grandfather, a notable combatant in the 1848 revolution had himself been something of a libertine.) For four generations one son in the family had always been christened Gyula.

Krúdy wasn't particularly good at school. Like Sindbad, the hero of this book, he was educated in the Piarist establishment at Podolin, originally in Hungary, but then absorbed into Slovakia following the First World War. He started writing at an early age, and his first short story was accepted by the local paper when he was only thirteen. Within three years he had written some hundred stories.

Still in his teens, he ran away from home and sought work with the journals of the larger towns of eastern Hungary and Transylvania – at that time also part of Hungary. His father disinherited him and he lived from hand to mouth – a gambler, drinker, womaniser, bon viveur and occasional duellist. He was not quite eighteen when he arrived in Budapest in 1896. The date is significant for it supposedly marked one thousand years of Magyar settlement in the Carpathian basin and the founding of the Hungarian state. A world fair was arranged to commemorate this millennium. Since 1867 Budapest had been the fastest growing city in Europe and the Millennial Fair, with its blending of historical pageant and technological progress, marked the apex of this development. The world's second underground railway system – the first was in London – was opened

in Budapest in 1896. Europe's largest stock exchange had been finished in Budapest the previous year and the Hungarian Parliament, the largest parliament building in the world at that time, was close to completion. Hungary had modern art and modern literature, an active commercial sector and a busy cosmopolitan culture. It had theatre, opera and its own national literary epics.

When Krúdy first moved to Budapest he had intended to be a poet but no poems were forthcoming; stories and journalism took all his attention. Handsome and charismatic, at the age of twenty he married a Jewish writer and schoolteacher called Bella Spiegler who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Satanella'. By that time his first volume of stories had been published and he was writing for most of the major journals and periodicals of Budapest. Bella was older than him by some years and bore him four children, though marriage for Krúdy was a far from stable domestic arrangement. He lived on credit and advances and was rarely at home; people – especially women – fell in love with him and were happy to support him.

All this makes Krúdy sound like just another of those playboy-scribblers of the *fin de siècle.* In England he might have fallen off a bar stool like Lionel Johnson, and that would have been the end of him. But Krúdy was not of the Celtic Twilight temperament and his writing, though ornate, complex and aesthetic, was far more robust and individual. At its best it was recognised as an extraordinary enterprise which established not only a style but a heightened sensuous world, a Hungary of the imagination that Hungarians found both seduc-

tive and recognisable. This world encompassed both the provinces from which he came and Budapest.

The historian John Lukács observes that there was something rakish and romantic about the sexual life of the capital. Women outnumbered men. There were many high-class brothels, gambling dens, casinos, races and other amusements. Assignations in the Biedermeyer apartments of Pest, on the commercial left bank of the Danube, might be discreet but they were certainly not uncommon. There were fine cheap restaurants, cafés where writers and lovers were welcome, with live gypsy bands on hand to entertain them.

In many ways Hungary was still a feudal society. Out in the country, where Krúdy was born, peasants were tied to the service of the great landlords and conditions were harsh. Austria regarded the whole of Hungary as a sleepy, potentially barbaric province with one foot in modern Europe, the other in the Near East. The Hungarians formed a linguistic and ethnic minority in the dual monarchy led by Austria, but Hungary had many ethnic minorities of its own: Romanians and Slovaks, as well as Gypsies. Its territory was three times the size of current Hungary and extended from the Carpathians through the great plains of the central basin to the Adriatic seaboard with its port of Fiume – now Rijeka, in Slovenia. The impoverished minor nobility lived in country residences and small towns, maintaining as much of their manners as remained possible under the circumstances. The old hierarchies were largely observed and codes of courtesy deeply valued.

The Sindbad stories, which both reflected and undermined these values, appeared in magazines and individual volumes between 1911 and 1917. By 1919 Sindbad's Hungary was dead. Defeat in the First World War brought the dream-world to an end. In 1918, following that defeat, and the so-called Autumn Roses Revolution, a liberal–socialist coalition under Count Mihály Károlyi assumed control. Within a few months it had been ousted by the Communist Béla Kun and his Republic of Councils. Amid the chaos, to the incredulity of most Hungarians, the backward Romanian forces marched in, defeated the Hungarian Red Army and ransacked Budapest. This was an extraordinary trauma for the nation. When the Romanians withdrew, under allied pressure, it was only for the rightist forces of Admiral Horthy to take over. Horthy rode into Budapest on a white horse. Reprisals followed and many left-wing writers and politicians fled into exile. Krúdy, who had very little time for politics, was briefly in trouble because of some articles he had written defending the Republic of Councils.

For his country, worse was to follow: under the terms of the Treaties of Versailles and Trianon the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up and the countries on Hungary's borders, whose nationals made up most of Hungary's ethnic minorities, were rewarded for their support of the *entente* with vast new tracts of land. Transylvania, so central to Hungarian history and containing some of the oldest Hungarian settlements, was given over to Romania; Pozsony, once capital of Hungary, was renamed Bratislava and is today the capital of

Slovakia. Vast swathes of greater Hungary were swallowed up by Yugoslavia. Hungary lost one third of its population as well as two thirds of its territory. The world of Sindbad was truly finished: the country through which Sindbad had roamed was now relegated to works of fiction.

By the time he died in 1933 Krúdy had produced over fifty novels, some three thousand short stories, over a thousand articles and sketches and seven plays for the stage. As regards Krúdy's fiction, his prose style is highly original. The nineteenth-century novelist Kálmán Mikszáth might be cited as an early influence but Mikszáth was a realist, as was the other major novelist of the time, Mór Jókai, and Krúdy's bent was not for social realism but for a range of complex moods arising out of a state of melancholy. A highly literary kind of melancholy can be found in the Symbolist writers of the period. Sindbad himself is frequently in a melancholic condition, he listens to gypsy music, he watches the autumnal leaves swirl at his feet, hears the distant hoot of the train, the lapping of the river and admires the swirling of fog. He watches young skin dry and develop crow's-feet, he watches his own hair turn silver. A rich strain of late nineteenth-century melancholy accompanies everything he thinks or does. At times the language seems doom-laden and over-ripe, over-repetitive in its use of 'little', 'sad', and, inevitably, 'melancholy' itself.

But the remarkable thing is that, for all its period melancholy, *Sindbad* is a modernist work. Like Prufrock, Sindbad has measured out his life with coffee spoons and walked amongst the lowest of the dead – in

fact, for much of the book he *is* dead, a walking sentient ghost musing upon his own ghostliness – yet all the time the subversive force of irony is breaking things up, infusing the elegiac sadness with a welcome disruptive energy. In doing so it prefigures the stream of consciousness explored by Proust, Woolf and Joyce: an interesting point of correspondence with Joyce appears when Sindbad advises one of his lovers, 'Monkey', to read the works of Paul de Kock, a writer of erotic stories equally appreciated by Molly Bloom. Most remarkably, it anticipates the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende.

The Sindbad stories refer to real and possible metamorphoses: at one point Sindbad changes into a sprig of mistletoe and contemplates turning into a comb. This sense of shift is reflected in Krúdy's syntax – something strange begins to happen to language and its relation to experience. Krúdy's long rolling sentences are held together by sentiment, sensuality and dream, but for all their sense of gentle flux, something is breaking them up. They are open-ended affairs which begin in the ordinary way but fly off at specific points of association, constantly diverting the reader away from the linear syntactic flow of the narrative. Tenses change continually. The subject–verb–object structure is subverted, in much the same way as a hierarchy or social order might be, from within. Before the reader knows it, the language has come to pieces in his hands, leaving a curiously sweet erotic vacuum, like an ache without a centre. That ache is at the heart of Krúdy's prose and particularly of the Sindbad stories.

It may be fanciful to see the breaking up of Hungary anticipated in the breaking up of Krúdy's prose but it is tempting. There is something prophetic about the way the fiction works. It looks resolutely backwards for its ethos – Sindbad is, after all, over three hundred years old, if he is any age at all – and the effort of having to move the narrative forwards simply splinters the syntactic structure. If the prophetic power of literature lies in the imagination's helpless sensitivity to currents of change, then Krúdy's fiction is an outstanding illustration of that power. The elegant barque of his prose has already struck the rocks and every wave sends a few more beams and planks shivering into the water.

The very first paragraph of 'Youth', the first story in the book, serves as a model for what is to follow:

> Once upon a damp and moonlit night a man with greying hair was watching the autumn mist form figures of chimney-sweeps on the rooftops. Somewhere in the monastery at Podolin, he was thinking, there is, or was, an old painting, showing a shaggy-haired figure with a wild upcurled moustache, a thick beard, red as a woman's hair, two big round eyes with elongated pale blue pupils and a complexion as ruddy as the colour on a white tablecloth when light passes through a full wine glass on a sunny winter noon. This man was Prince Lubomirski.

The time is uncertain, the view mistily retrospective but the place is precise and the vision highly detailed. Chimney-sweeps appear then disappear along with the mist. The object of focus is not real life but a painting. As we look at the painting and note the wild ancestral figure we stare into his eyes and discover a beam of light passing through a wine glass on a white tablecloth on a sunny winter noon. Then the figure is named and we read seven paragraphs about him and his times before getting to the subject of the story which concerns an incident from Sindbad's childhood – though we must remember it is the man with greying hair who is recalling it. The action of the story amounts to no more than a brief tragic anecdote about the death by drowning of a boy nicknamed Pope Gregory, an anecdote told lightly enough but constantly moving between light and darkness, hinting at the possibility of romance.

Prince Lubomirski, who does not appear to be an agent in the story, is an important symbolic figure, a seducer and ever-fertile father, the atavistic god to whom maidens are sacrificed. Róza, one of three sisters, and the romantic interest, is herself a kind of river goddess, who must be appeased, in her case with the unfortunate victim of the drowning. Prince Lubomirski and Róza are part of the landscape: they are emanations of the soil but are handled lightly, almost humorously. The manner of address is playful, presenting the incident as a sad funny story with a haunting erotic edge of sensuality. That haunting erotic edge is Sindbad's medium: it is the god Krúdy serves.

The Adventures of Sindbad

The adventures of Sindbad consist of nothing but interrupted, extended, inconclusive anecdotes whose purpose is to conjure the god, not to satisfy notions of character and consequence. In this sense they are amoral. The drowning in the first story may be read as a highly unfair punishment for Pope Gregory's unattractiveness: the boy's hunch-back invites rejection by the god's female aspect. But there is no time to pity Pope Gregory – now you see him, now you don't and that is all there is to it. The story of the drowning is not the real issue, it is merely the occasion. Even when Krúdy embarks on a longer tale there is no real narrative consequence. One thing happens, then another, but ostensible events are mostly occasions for the hidden 'real' event, which is the death and resurrection of desire. Desire is the appropriate word. To call it love would be premature. Fidelity is what partners demand of each other, not what they grant. They feel intensely but their feelings are shallow and this does not bother them. Krúdy's characters find the lightness of their being wholly bearable.

So the narrative line is broken time and again, and Sindbad dies and returns and drifts through time as if time itself were nothing but an autumn mist. Neither is he restricted to a merely human existence. He can turn into inanimate objects. He is protean in so far as desire is so, being able to read himself into any body or any thing. There is a hint of the late Byron of *Don Juan* and *Beppo* in the way Sindbad floats. Sindbad is a sort of sentimental digressive Don Juan, and his world is not unlike that of Byron's Venice – more provincial of

course, its glamour second-hand and peripheral, but genuine for all that. In Krúdy, Hungary becomes a floating world, much like Byron's.

That sense of the periphery relates to the notion of empire too. The standard imperial values are reduced to resonances and associations vainly flapping in the provincial void. Of what value is the pioneer spirit, the spirit of enterprise, buccaneering courage or high-minded philanthropy here? Here, opportunities for advancement are chiefly in the form of reverie, a reverie whose relation to the possible and here-and-now is problematic. The reality on which fantasy must work is itself fading. Krúdy loves everything faded. The whole paraphernalia of the Austro-Hungarian pastoral has begun to look slightly ridiculous to a sharp eye. Krúdy knows the game is up, that the world awaiting Sindbad's descendants will not be like that of Sindbad's own centuries. In 'Sindbad and the Actress' he shows us that which had appeared to be eternal in the Hungarian village.

> The people changed but they were replaced by others precisely like them. As if birth, death and marriage were all part of some curious joke. Even now it was the ancestral dead sitting round the table. They reproduced themselves: women, children. The weathercock spins, the wind and rain beat at the roof precisely as before, and neither the cloud approaching from the west nor the meadow stretching far into the distance appears to acknowledge the

> fact that the man sitting at the window is of this century not the last.

Portraits of ancestors appear throughout the adventures. They add tone to that mortuary charm. The irony underlying them proclaims the fact that Sindbad does not fully believe in either them or himself. He is an aging lover and has already died several times over. Those magical transformations and that continual shifting between spirit and flesh only go to show that he is hardly there.

He is certainly a creature of vestiges. Sindbad is a self-proclaimed voyeur and fetishist. He loves women's clothes almost more than the women themselves. He admits that he finds the naked woman disappointing. He has an eye for fashion and enjoys watching women parade in their latest outfits. In 'Sindbad's Dream' he notes women in their silken dresses 'which they raised to reveal high white-laced boots'; in 'Winter Journey' we meet the woman of his dreams 'still standing on the threshold in her lacquered ankle boots and delicate silk stockings'. 'Your figure is as it was, neat and graceful,' Sindbad says to one of his many actress loves, Paula, in another story. 'Let me smell your hair! Show me your shoes and your stockings! You ought to wear finer gloves. The little ribbon about your neck is charming.' He is equally fastidious about the details of men's clothing, preferring the slightly romantic and faintly ridiculous, though he knows the difference between them. In 'The Woman Who Told Tales', young Albert, who has been deeply smitten by the mysterious siren

and ex-flower girl, Mrs Boldogfalvi, wears a highly romantic costume of tall riding boots, cloak and a plumed hat. In fact he is not unlike Sindbad himself when Mrs Boldogfalvi first meets him. Pursuing Mrs Boldogfalvi, who has grown bored with him, Albert arrives at the inn she has just left, his face covered in dust, throws down his plumed hat and cries: 'Devil take her! What am I doing wearing this fancy dress?'

Fancy dress is an important element of Sindbad's fantasies. Take a passage from another of Krúdy's winding sentences:

> ... when behind open windows striking women of foreign appearance are taking their clothes off in the sleeping compartments and men wearing military decorations are reading broadsheets in the dining car, and you pick up that blend of Havana and cologne even through the smell of coaldust, then Sindbad becomes a black moustached, Henry VIII-bearded sleeping car attendant in a gold braided hat, who calmly and elegantly steps into the sleeping compartments, approaches the lovely Romanian woman who is already dozing and asks, in a cool but delicate manner, 'Is there anything else I could get you, madam?'

Here, as elsewhere, Sindbad is a little Oedipal boy sensually pleasing his mother. The wisest and most fully rounded of Krúdy's female protagonists is the woman nicknamed Monkey, who, in only the second story of

the book, is already left to arrange matters after Sindbad's death. She raises his chin to the light of the window, closely examines his face, strokes his hair and says to him:

> '... sometimes I love you so much I feel less like your lover – your discarded, abandoned and forgotten lover – than like your mother. I know you so well. It is as if I had given birth to you.'

This is one of the key perceptions of the book, not so much for its revelation about missing mothers or the lure of the maternal but for its recognition of Sindbad's ambivalence. It turns out that Monkey knows more about his life than he does. A simplistic reading would suggest that all the women in Sindbad's life are merely projections of his desire, but Sindbad himself feels and acts as though he were a projection of theirs. Sindbad's contemplations on women will sometimes appear offensive to a modern reader. The passage in 'An Overnight Stay', where we are told that Sindbad likes 'Leaves in the park in autumn, blotched as if with blood, and abandoned windmills where one day he might murder the woman he loved best' is worrying, and another in 'Escape from Women', where Sindbad suggests that treating women like children is downright insulting. But the very same passage later transforms these child-women into would-be mothers of Sindbad. As the ruminations progress, Sindbad comes to recognise himself as a rogue, one who, in the Middle Ages,

'would have gone the rounds of the prisons where he would have been shorn, first of his nose, then of his ears'. This is familiar territory of course, and is only half-heartedly offered as an excuse.

In a paper recently given at the Collegium in Budapest, the translator John Bátki pointed out how Krúdy evokes the old Goddess cults of his home country, the marshy wetlands of the River Tisza. Bátki draws on research by Marija Gimbutas into the neolithic religions of old Europe to demonstrate that Krúdy's later work is open to anthropological readings. Perhaps Sindbad is a faded Adonis or Tammuz. Even if that is the case, we simply cannot take him at his own evaluation. Krúdy doesn't, nor, for that matter, does Sindbad himself. Sindbad says he cannot help but tell the truth, but this truth concerns his condition, not any objective state of affairs. The condition subsumes his hypocrisy.

> 'He could never forgive women. He thought he perceived miraculous qualities in them, a combination of the fidelity of the saints with the virtues of the martyrs. And how he would rage when one of them took up with another man though it was he who had long left her.'

Hypocrisy *is* the state of affairs in dreams. Sindbad acts ironically in a world in which he half-believes. In so far as he believes in it, we are given to understand that he is naïve – a creature of the past. Sindbad's dreams are clearly historical fancies – tiny costumed tableaux, doll's house flirtations – but the women's

dreams are all the more substantial for including him as he is. In effect he is validated by their dreams.

Dreams are the ultimate channel of communication. 'I dreamt you were dreaming with me, so I set out,' he says to Paula on meeting her. In their dreams he revisits the women he once seduced, or who seduced him – or else returns as a ghost. They lock him in secret rooms. They want to take him away to their quiet country retreats. He is what they would have him be. 'His whole long life he had been "my darling" to two or three women at a time,' Krúdy tells us. Maybe this is because Sindbad has 'a genius for observing women, for secretly following them and discovering their hopes, secrets and desires'. He is a beautiful boy-child with a grey moustache and perfect manners, the infant fascinated by the female principle and its power. And indeed, as an exercise in power, it is hard to say who is in control. Women kill themselves for him, but he kills himself for them too. They have him on a string as much as he has them. It is the mutual exercise of erotic power that makes the transaction such a pleasure.

Yet the pleasure is never free of danger and there is usually a price to be paid for it. Pope Gregory pays it. So do the dead babies sleeping in the ditch, those 'tiny souls who had perished downless, featherless' but who nevertheless resurrect themselves as little frogs and hop onto their mothers' feet as the women are crossing for sexual assignations in the graveyard. So do the suicides drifting in the waters of the Danube and the dead mother who hears her own daughter being seduced by a ghost directly above her grave – all pay the price. Time and

again Sindbad envisages his own death although it frightens him. When his lover Fanny proposes a suicide pact he finds the thought so terrifying that he shudders: 'I know death. Death is for women.' But it is he who has been dead through most of the book. In any case, the idea of the suicide pact has come to the lady a few hours too late. It is already dawn. 'The milkman is due,' says Fanny, 'my husband will arrive by the first train, the servants will be up and ready to go to the market ... and I shall go to hospital to visit my sick brother.'

Romance requires night and mists. Clear light destroys it. A young Hungarian man of the 1920s might have used Sindbad as a working manual of sexual relations. He might not have suspected the tricks those strange long open sentences were playing on him; that the carpet was, in effect, being pulled from under his and the author's own feet. Yet the manual still has its surprises. The vampirical Sindbad is less interested in the blood of young virgins than in the nourishment provided by fellow veterans of the sexual campaign.

Once, when an officer of the Hussars insulted him, Krúdy tore the man's sword from his waist and presented the sword to the madam of a brothel. He then fought the duel to which the Hussar had challenged him – and won. He would sit up all night drinking. On another occasion, thinking that Krúdy had fallen asleep, an exhausted drinking companion tried to tip-toe from the room. 'Come back and talk some more,' Krúdy's deep voice ordered him.

The voice that speaks to us in *The Adventures of Sindbad* has authority. Its discourse is woven out of the night-talk of duels and seductions remembered but not quite believed. 'Let us therefore close the file on Sindbad's not altogether pointless and occasionally amusing existence,' Krúdy declares in 'Escape from Women', dismissing his romantic ironical hero with an equally ironic gesture. The new world is moving under Sindbad much as the underground train moved under the feet of the citizens of Budapest, shaking the cobbles of the old.

George Szirtes