

Passion in Translation

by Arthur Phillips

Maybe I should just write, “Read Sunflower,” and leave it at that. Otherwise, I might lose all control of myself, considering how fans of the great Hungarian novelist Gyula Krúdy (1878-1933) tend to start talking gibberish when trying to describe what exactly he does that’s so unique.

Here, for example, is one of his translators, the usually sober-minded Anglo-Hungarian poet George Szirtes, describing Krúdy’s Sindbad stories (no relation to the Arab sailor): “The subject-verb-object structure is subverted, in much the same way as a hierarchy or social order might be...the language comes to pieces...leaving a curiously sweet erotic vacuum, like an ache without a centre.”ⁱ Other than whetting your appetite for a session of sweet erotic vacuuming, does that make Krúdy’s literary power clear to you? No? Well, then, perhaps this old jacket copy will be more helpful: “Krúdy’s verbal/shamanistic trance-and-dance translates historical reverie into a vision that transcends national and ethnic borderlines.”ⁱⁱ Not quite clear yet? The Hungarian-American historian John Lukacs, probably Krúdy’s greatest promoter in English, finally explains the trouble: “[Krúdy] is translatable only with the greatest of difficulty—in essence hardly translatable at all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Talk of translation-immunity is usually reserved for poets, not novelists. But if Krúdy’s work is unique, so laden with references, aromas, and rhythms peculiar to his native tongue and native land that any effort to shove his images and ideas and diction into a foreign language will distort it beyond recognition, then where does that leave those few of us who can’t read Hungarian?

Krúdy has been compared to his great contemporaries (Marcel Proust, James Joyce^{iv}, Joseph Roth^v) and his great followers (Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez^{vi}), even if he never read them and they never knew of him. Other comparisons come, a little sluggishly, to mind. His work purrs with fin-de-siècle urbane eroticism found in Arthur

Schnitzler's stories. He breathes nostalgia and weaves long, twisting sentences like Proust. His rapidly shifting points-of-view and streams of consciousness might recall Virginia Woolf. He is willing to let dream and reality overflow each other's boundaries like Kafka. He is ironic and wise about the human heart and life's maddening futility, like Chekhov. His fond portrayal of rural life brings to mind the Levin scenes in Anna Karenina. And yet, all these faint resemblances only illuminate this or that aspect of Krúdy, and leave most of him in shadows. He is not only untranslatable, he's also literally incomparable.

"No one has, even remotely, written like Krúdy in Hungarian,"^{vii} says Lukacs. Given how singular Hungarian is in the first place, how dissimilar in every way from English, a writer who is himself unique *in that language* presents translators with a profound challenge, and that may be part of the reason there is so little of him in English. We have only three volumes of his fiction and one of journalism, though he wrote, with 19th-century prolificacy, more than fifty novels and three thousand short stories^{viii}, starting when he was only thirteen^{ix}. And so, it is cause for celebration that New York Review Books is reissuing Sunflower in its 1997 translation, if only because now the book sheds its 1997 jacket copy, possibly the worst jacket copy in the history of literature ("This sensually observed episode in Womanhood's ongoing, ever-variable encounter with the male principle... A richly quintessentialized cast... a fivefold bevy of females... a cantankerous hunk of Magyar manhood.")

Glad as I am that Krúdy is still being made available to English readers, I'd be celebrating a little harder if the publishers had, say, commissioned a previously untranslated work—there are more Sindbad stories, and Lukacs speaks highly of a novel called The Red Stagecoach—or even taken another stab at this one, to cast new light on Krúdy's unique style. The more minds that are at work on the problem of translating the untranslatable, the better.

**

Sunflower (1918), written in serial form in the closing months of a world war that Hungary was losing, is a torrent of love affairs and nostalgia, set in the demi-monde of

Budapest and in the mystical countryside of Krúdy's origin—the birches and marshes of north-eastern Hungary. It is not a realistic novel. The dead recover, and ghosts, none too admirably, cuckold the living. The other world is described vaguely, irreligiously, as a place where love affairs likely continue.

Here's the whole plot, and in synopsis it can seem both a little overwrought and underdeveloped, but bear with me and Krúdy. Over the course of a year, Eveline, the innocent, loves and flees Kálmán, a young gambler and hound-dog, who sponges off her and other women, with whom he repeatedly betrays Eveline. Andor Álmos, the lonely country gentleman, loves Eveline, and so he dies for her, though when she comes to his house and weeps over his corpse, he comes back to life. Álmos's mother, also named Eveline, was widowed by three husbands, the first two by duels and the third because she vowed she would sleep with him only if he promised to kill himself immediately after. She was so beautiful that he complied. Mr. Pistoli, a spectacular creation, is the aging village bully and Don Juan. He has packed off three wives to the insane asylum over the years, though one night they all escape and turn up at his house for a farewell foursome. Eveline's brassy feminist pal, Miss Maszkerádi, arrives, spitting fire. She, having finished with men once and for all (considering what the depraved soldier did to her and the princess back in Cairo), will at first only "embrace" with her legs an old, withered tree. When she goes back to men, she makes up for lost time, betraying Eveline with Kálmán, then, after taking a good beating, sleeping with Pistoli, the pleasure of which kills him, apparently permanently. Eveline and Álmos, with the help of his wise ex-lover, Risoulette, obliquely and slowly consider marrying and settling into the rhythms and peace of a rural, passionless life in the birch country. That's it.

Sunflower is an erotic carnival. Unfaithful spouses (obviously) abound. Respectable noblewomen are "familiar with the notorious Marquis's book of recipes."^x Rakes devour the maidens of Budapest, and passions drive men and women out of their minds—"love, separated from murder by the narrowest of margins."^{xi} An infatuated lover's eyes "are a hair's breadth away from madness; eyes that would terrify, if on a lonely night one were

to behold them reflected in a mirror.”^{xii} But references to death are just as pervasive; the carnival is held under stormy skies and in the high winds of passing time.

Events are plentiful, but don't come to Sunflower for its plot. By turns smutty, nostalgic, slapstick and tender, cynical and hopeful, the novel's real subject is life and love: the futility but unavoidability of passion, the pain and pleasure of memory, and the dusty grave that awaits all of us. One character scolds another, sick with love, “You went and climbed up on the high wire at the traveling circus and now you can't come down. Why go in for this goggle-eyed torment when you can live your life painlessly, without as much as a sore throat?”^{xiii} That is the main question of the book, asked in a thousand different tones, answered differently by dozens of men and women; this novelist is a scientist who examines a specimen through his trusty kaleidoscope.

**

The plot can be summed up in a page, and the themes (like all novelistic themes, big ideas, main points, morals) are easily expressed in a few words; you don't need a novel to do it. No, Sunflower is a great novel not for its story or its lessons, but because it is full of Krúdy's *writing*. His voice, images, insights, and twists of language are the whole point. Krúdy wrote paintings: portraits of unforgettable characters, portraits of Budapest and the Hungarian countryside, portraits of emotion and motivation. (Lukacs even compares him to Claude Monet.^{xiv}) Here is a womanizer you won't forget: “Mr. Pistoli's favourites were women prone to hysteria, whom he would sniff out seven counties off. He would rub his hands together in ecstasy hearing news of a woman who had had her hair shorn because she fancied it singed her shoulders. He capered like a billygoat when a woman confessed to him that she had swallowed her child.... [He] packed up as soon as he tired of the fun.”^{xv} He “sized up feminine gullibility as precisely as a grocer weighing out saffron.”^{xvi} Skimming these descriptions is the equivalent of sprinting through the Louvre. Slow down and dig in. You're reading someone who can do things you and I can't do, something no one else does at all, if we are to trust Lukacs's description.

Krúdy's style is built of long comparisons with striking imagery that, at the end of the sentence, make you stop and try to recall where you began, and what the comparison

reveals about the subject: “Her face was unapproachably severe, like a façade with shuttered windows, where no crimson-clad girls ever lean out over the windowsill.”^{xxvii} Sometimes the similes explain something, but it is not quite clear what: “Álmos nodded without emotion, a most peculiar nod, like a one-legged man confronting his lost limb preserved in spirits.”^{xxviii}

The sheer richness of his imagery can be overwhelming. I intended to mark just a select few representative sentences, but soon my page was black with underlining: dawn, “as women of the street slink homeward, carrying their ragged souls, whipped to tatters.”^{xxix} “The wind, like some bandit, blew a sharp whistle in the fields, and hunched-over assassins rushed behind bushes and fences.”^{xxx} (Is there even a name for that figure of speech? Speculative metaphorical personification?) A man sees a scornful woman’s “fiery glance that ran down the shadowy highway like a burning carriage, as if a mirror’s shard had flashed on the horizon.”^{xxxi} Innocent maidens have “hearts overflowing with love, like a stone trough whose water drips from a little-used faucet.”^{xxxii} How about this one: smashed in the head by a violin, “the libertine collapsed like a whirling mass of dry leaves, when the autumn wind suddenly withdraws behind a tombstone in the municipal park to overhear the conversation of two lovers.”^{xxxiii} Wait, wait, one more: an old woman, dressed up in feathered hat and finery, “on parade like some superannuated circus steed that, come tomorrow, might be harnessed to a hearse.”^{xxxiv}

A Krúdy trademark is the linked comparison, one extended simile or metaphor stacked upon another, with magical impossibilities sprinkled all around. In periods of winter depression, “The mirror’s reflection grows faint, or perhaps the face itself does, taking on an acrid, fastidious look like that of a cobwebbed old daguerreotype set by sentimental hands on a headstone. In the pupil of the eye tiny, swimming dots appear: they are the rowboats steered by melancholy boatmen conveying luggage and traveler—departing life—from the shore to the vast old bark awaiting.”^{xxxv}

This writing, grumps will say, “draws attention to itself” or “slows down the reader.” Listen, grumps, that’s the point: the storyteller captivating his reader. Sneak off

somewhere quiet and read it aloud. Listen to him talking to you. He wants you to go slow, to shut out everything else. His voice is as important as what happens to his characters. You may start to feel that the imaginary people are introducing you to a real one, talking to you from ninety years ago.

**

But if Krúdy is truly as untranslatable as a poet, then I am hearing only a faint whisper, much less of the real thing than I get of Kafka, Proust, Mann or other translated heroes. My Krúdy depends for his existence upon intermediaries, whose competence I cannot judge. So who is this writer I have come to love? Is it Krúdy by way of Eszter Molnár:

There used to be an old painting in the monastery of Podolin—a grey-haired man thought to himself one night towards autumn, while outside the mist curled into shades of chimney-sweeps walking the roof-tops in the damp moonlight—a painting of a shaggy-haired man with bushy moustaches turning up at the tips like a gallant's, a beard thick and rust-coloured like the curls of a red-head, ringed eyes that were almond-shaped and of a very light blue, and a ruddy face the colour of wine sparkling on a white table on a sunny winter day. This was Prince Lubomirski.^{xxvi}

Or by way of George Szirtes:

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 of a white tablecloth when light passes through a full wine glass on a sunny winter noon. This man was Prince Lubomirski.^{xxvii}

Something is wrong here. It is like a children's puzzle: can you spot the two thousand differences? Surely Hungarian isn't as subjective as all *that*. Molnár produced two (admittedly difficult) sentences; Szirtes three, much clearer in structure. Molnár's painted prince has a ruddy face the color of sparkling wine; Szirtes's is the color of light passing *through* the wine and projecting onto the tablecloth – the point goes to Szirtes for plausibility and beauty (assuming that's what Krúdy wrote—can Hungarian have only one word for *table* and *tablecloth*?) Molnár's prince has almond-shaped, light blue eyes—plausible enough, though *ringed* makes me think he's a raccoon. Szirtes describes the far less likely elongated, pale blue *pupils*, which would imply either a painting of the prince by Modigliani or a prince with severe cataracts. And what happened to the

comparison to a gallant? The (fabulous) mist-made chimney-sweeps are either ghostly *shades* or the technical *figures*. “Once upon” is quite a tone to set in the story’s first words, one of fairy-tales—is it Krúdy’s? Or did he intend the casual, slow-building “there used to be an old painting”? And *did* there “used to be” an old painting, or should we rely on the *uncertain* report that “there is, or was” one? The translators could not even agree on the title of this story.

This level of precision matters most especially for a writer like Krúdy, for whom dreams, memories, and desires blend like rivers converging. Art like that requires precision if it is to enchant and not merely confuse. Still, two translations are better than one, and a third might settle the questions raised by the first two.

Here is a troubling beauty from Molnár:

[Sindbad] saw a red window at the back of the wooden playhouse, from where the laughter of the dressing actresses sounded as if green, iridescent beetles were flying in the night, out of the window glowing with a reddish light. Then K. Nagy, the retired actor, coughed somewhere in the distance—perhaps from behind the barber’s curtain, and choking with laughter, gasping for breath, said: “Sindbad, for every kiss that you’ve missed, they’ll stick an old slipper on your nose in the netherworld.”^{xxviii}

A lovely image: the *sound* of the actresses laughing is like the *sight* of flying beetles, and from within Sindbad’s sensual musing comes the voice of a long-dead friend, teasing him from far or near, behind a curtain, ghost or memory indistinguishable, or an unimportant distinction. Perfect. But then they do *what* with slippers? In the “netherworld”? Really? I feel I see Krúdy for a moment, only to be suddenly separated by accented or archaic English.

John Báltki, who has translated several Hungarian poets, makes some very strange decisions that mar his otherwise extraordinary work in Sunflower. He anglicizes some characters’ names, but not others. He translates the names of some streets, but not others. He translates a district of Budapest (Józsefváros) not into English (the Joseph District or Josephtown), but into *German* (Josephstadt). He translates one character’s name literally and then sticks the translation onto the original Hungarian as a hyphenate; the poor

character is burdened for the whole novel with the very odd and not very enlightening name of “Andor Álmos-Dreamer.” More: the novel opens with a formal, 19th-century tone—“The young miss lay abed,”—but ends rich in 1950’s-era slang. Whether the original novel similarly relaxes its language as it proceeds, I cannot say, but I strongly doubt there is any Hungarian for which the most apt translation into English is “Hot diggety-dog.”^{xxix}

Krúdy-Bátki, Krúdy-Molnár, and Krúdy-Szirtes are—if not yet precisely the Krúdy that Hungarians revere—at the very least, more than enough to win this reader’s heart. I only hope that there will be much, much more of Krúdy to come, with the healthy competition and revision that multiple translators can bring. The more translations of this untranslatable genius there are, the closer we will approach the shimmering, melancholy world of his prose.

Sunflower, by Gyula Krúdy, trans. John Bátki, NYRB, 2007, and Corvina, 1997.

The Knight of Dreams, by Gyula Krúdy, trans. Eszter Molnár, Noran Books, 1999.

The Adventures of Sindbad, by Gyula Krúdy, trans. George Szirtes, CEU Press, 1998.

Krúdy's Chronicles, by Gyula Krúdy, trans. John Bátki, CEU Press, 2000.

Budapest 1900, by John Lukacs, Grove Weidenfeld, 1998.

ⁱ The Adventures of Sindbad, p. xiii.

ⁱⁱ Sunflower, 1997 (Corvina), back jacket.

ⁱⁱⁱ Budapest 1900, p. 160.

^{iv} The Adventures of Sindbad, p. xiii.

^v Sunflower, 2007, back jacket.

^{vi} The Adventures of Sindbad, p. xiii.

^{vii} Budapest 1900, p. 161.

^{viii} The Adventures of Sindbad, p. xii.

^{ix} The Adventures of Sindbad, p. viii.

^x Sunflower, p. 132.

^{xi} Sunflower, p. 201.

^{xii} Sunflower, pp 175-176.

^{xiii} Sunflower, p. 140.

^{xiv} Sunflower, p. xviii.

^{xv} Sunflower, p. 106.

^{xvi} Sunflower, p. 148

^{xvii} Sunflower, pp.116-117.

^{xviii} Sunflower, p. 38.

^{xix} Sunflower, p. 143.

^{xx} Sunflower, p. 222.

^{xxi} Sunflower, p. 195.

^{xxii} Sunflower, p. 73.

^{xxiii} Sunflower, p. 77.

^{xxiv} Sunflower, p. 64.

^{xxv} Sunflower, p. 19.

^{xxvi} The Knight of Dreams, p. 47.

^{xxvii} The Adventures of Sindbad, p. 1.

^{xxviii} The Knight of Dreams, p. 73.

^{xxix} Sunflower, p. 153.