

Anna Horváth

**Gyula Krúdy's Mohács-trilogy (The Birth of a Historical Documentary Novel)**

Theses for PhD-dissertation

*Antecedents, subject matter and methods of the research*

The subject matter of my dissertation is Gyula Krúdy's historical trilogy edited by András Barta under the now widely accepted title: *King Novels* which – according to the more or less univocal evaluation of scholars – does not belong to Krúdy's vintage work. Nonetheless, more attention has been paid to the trilogy recently: an essay and a whole dissertation were written about it. Several questions remain, however, still open even after these new approaches that have, surprisingly, not undertaken a comprehensive philological and interpretive account: it is this investigation that forms the aim of the present work.

In the first part of the dissertation I intend, above all, to address the question of the novels' sources. My hypothesis is that this task not only can but also has to be accomplished as a preliminary study to any further interpretation: as long as the relation of the novel to its sources remains unclear, we cannot have a valid ground to examine the problems raised by its genre as well as by its vision of history. To anticipate the outcomes: it turned out that Krúdy drew upon his sources – works of historiography as Pál Jászay's *The Days of the Hungarian Nation after the Disaster at Mohács (A magyar nemzet napjai a mohácsi vész után)* and Tivadar Ortvay's *Queen Mary, Consort of Lewis II (Mária királyné, II. Lajos neje)* – in a much more extensive way than has hitherto been supposed. Therefore, the *King Novels'* genre ought to be defined as one standing nearer to documentary novels than to classic historical ones and as such it seems reasonable to label it as a historical documentary novel. This is in close relation with the fact that in the trilogy Krúdy focused on individuals' life story rather than on general vision of history. The defeat at Mohács he saw not as a national cataclysm but as an event that exposed human fates, defections, vices, suddenly changing lives.

In the second part of my dissertation I scrutinise the question of the artistic tools by which the novel's world was built, also mainly on the basis of the above-mentioned historical sources. I analyse the psychology of the novels' figures, the system-building motives in the text, the function of its metaphors, and not least the cross-references linking the *King Novels* to Krúdy's oeuvre. In this aspect, the main outcome of the analyses proved to be the insight that Krúdy aspired to the creation of a form of identity which should be regarded, from several points of view, as a return to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century historical novel. He claims the psycho-physical unity of the person, i.e. that bodily processes are symptoms of mental events. Concerning the recurrent components within the work it became clear that a long-running characteristic of Krúdy's writing, i.e. cutting and pasting texts from his earlier works (László Sturm), is detectable also in this case. These self-quotations add new ones to the many layers of the text and on the other hand they open new interpretational prospects and also may offer sometimes a clue to hidden meanings.

The third main part of the dissertation consists in a comparative approach to three novels treating a similar subject: Krúdy's *King Novels*, Mór Jókai's *György Fráter*, and József Eötvös's *Hungary in 1514 (Magyarország 1514-ben)*, with a look at Irén Gulácsy's *Black Bridegrooms (Fekete vőlegények)* – a project hitherto not formulated by the Krúdy-scholarship. In these chapters, I argue for Krúdy's considering the works of Eötvös and Jókai when penning his. He challenged their theory on the historical novel and, in Jókai's case, textual borrowings can be displayed as well as a polemic on the level of narration. The involvement of *Black Bridegrooms* into the analyses was helpful by highlighting the extra-literary exigencies which should have been met by Krúdy while writing a historical novel less than a decade after the Treaty of Trianon and four hundred years after the battle at Mohács.

#### *The outcomes of the dissertation*

The comparative philological analysis, on the one hand revealing the impact of certain historical works on the novels, contributes as well to a better understanding of Krúdy's artistic technique. The pieces in the text of the novels originating from the works of Jászay and Ortway can be divided into two classes. Firstly, those providing the frame, the dynamics, and the historical credibility of the story, while other not

strictly historical elements (original phrases, unusual ideas) were borrowed by the author for their stylistic value. Producing an authentic historical story was not Krúdy's sole aim when he turned to the historians' work. He needed much more: details to show his expertise, sceneries to place his heroes into, and genuine stories enabling him to boast of his historical knowledge. Thus, the realistic treats of the novel are much more due to the author's attachment to his sources than to his "ability to depict reality" (István Sótér).

This historical documentary novel, emerging with clearer outlines after the identification of its sources, is then evaluated before the background of some theories of the historical novel. I prove that the text, however containing abundant historical information, is not perceived by the reader as a unity but as an inorganic kaleidoscope. Furthermore, events are not explained, morals are not drawn. In spite of the detailed narration of the story, the reading of the trilogy leaves behind a sense of incompleteness stated by Hayden White concerning the chronicles. The abrupt ending is one cause of the sense of fragmentation and deficiency. The other is due to the fact that the artistic methods used to the poetic transformation of the original works of history can embrace but shorter units. Therefore the novel is held together by nothing but the protagonists. A comprehensive view grasps a series of short stories rather than a novel. The "formal coherence", claimed by White, ends up in formalism.

After deliberating the eventualities of a possible reading of the Mohács-trilogy as a composite novel (Gábor Bezeczky), or as an attempt to renew the "borderline" (Sándor Hites) between literature and historiography, I arrive in the conclusion of the philological part of my dissertation to the insights as follows. Krúdy attempted not the renewal of the historical novel as such but the interpretation of the relation of humans to history. To achieve his goal he needed the novelist's technical skills. The content of Krúdy's historical documentary novel does not differ from that of its sources (i.e., its content is not another story) and he apparently expected that the virtual reader will not be able to separate fiction from historical description. Krúdy's ambition was a narration not qualitatively different from but congruent with its sources: this is why he emphasised his conviction that the novelist has more sophisticated tools to reproduce reality than the historian does. Krúdy recognized, and not without any ground, the reifying tendency of historiography intending to reconstruct mere facts and as a reaction he took on the task of the restitution of figures to their liveliness by historical narration.

In parallel, on the other hand, the author attempted to represent the interrelatedness of the fate of his figures with political history in a different way from what the historiographers had chosen. True, he did not deny free will and capacity of action to his figures but he negated their ability to foresee the consequences of their deeds and so to have real impact on their own fate.

The equivocal character of the trilogy as a historical novel is also revealed by the fact that history remains marginalised throughout the novel while its main subject matter is a young and obstinate woman's fight for recognition and power, and her return on the chosen road towards patience and a more complete self-knowledge. The rivalry between Szapolyai and Ferdinand furnishes but an accidental background for this. This fact explains the indistinct contours of the episodic figures as well as the marginalisation of the events of political history and also explains why Krúdy filled his novel with miscellaneous information. Above all, it was not the historical period what stimulated Krúdy's interest but his protagonist: thus, he added other ingredients plentifully to conceal the fact that he knows their nature only superficially. Dividing the used materials into little nothings and substantial events, the former elements are highly superior in number to the latter ones. Hence for Krúdy, according to the lessons of my dissertation, the main issue was not the dilemma whether the sources can be „overruled” (László Sturm), or not. Far from any polemics with the narrative or judgement the historians had formulated on the basis of their sources, he borrowed positive information without any theoretical supervision.

On this basis, I formulate in the dissertation a couple of remarks that may contribute to the scholarly discussion of central importance on Krúdy's characters. I intended to demonstrate that the novels written at the end of his career take a different position towards the realistic tradition than the works of earlier periods scrutinized by Tibor Gintli. It does not mean, of course, that the innovations characterizing Krúdy's prose during more than two decades would suddenly disappear. It is the ready-made materials that constrain the author of the documentary novels or in this case that of *King Novels*, and not merely by obliging him to preserve historical authenticity: they fix a different framework for the depiction of characters, too. The personalities preformed by documents and works of historiography appear already finished: it was not their decomposition but their enlivening that Krúdy undertook. Simultaneously with the marginalisation of the figures' own narrations which threatens the unity of

personality with decomposition, the author prefers the authoritarian narration which imposes on the figures an external unity.

The analysis of the figures and their relations has shown the position the other members of the court take around Queen Mary. The close reading revealed the strong position the viceroy Báthory achieved in the royal court after Mohács as well as the author's scornful opinion on György Brandenburi and János Szapolyai. In the characterization of the King Lewis II Krúdy diverged, from the very beginnings, from the usual ways of his representation: he built in the trilogy a figure who possesses the required ability and will to reign.

The evaluation of the motives through the trilogy was helpful to mapping its texture beyond the immediate borrowings: I focused on the elements which were useful for Krúdy, beyond solely extracting them from history books, to build his figures' world, as well as to represent the period of Mohács. There is one single problem present in all the three novels: that of reign and, in connection with it, of money and knowledge. The relation of the protagonist to these elements is in constant flux. Although Krúdy intended to represent the transformation the personality of Mary had undergone during her short stay in Hungary, the process of learning she went through concerns these issues rather than herself. The other motives hold together smaller units: the metaphors of Hell characterise the period of the campaign while Lutheranism is the connecting thread of the episode in Pozsony (Bratislava). It becomes clear that Krúdy did not return in this work to the realm of his early medieval stories. I also demonstrate that the recurrent elements produce meaning in the text. One of the principles building the structure of the novel is the repetition of events or the reappearance of objects.

The research into the main characteristics of the novels' narrative strategy brought us closer to a better understanding of genre problems. The first variant of the novel, entitled *Shadow King (Árnyékkirály)*, featured the king's scribe as narrator. He, however, possessed neither position high nor intellect sharp enough to recapitulate alone the story of the times of Mohács. In the final version an anonymous but well-shaped figure – a man – became the narrator who is, unlike the scribe, the reader's contemporary. On the basis of Jane Millgate's interpretation one can establish the main differences between Krúdy's and the classic, Scott-like narration. In his case, the distance of the narrator from his hero is not historicized. The narrator's point of view remains rather anecdotic and he never looks at his protagonist with irony. The reason

lies in the choice of the principal heroine: Mary – a historical personality – cannot be treated like a hero who is purely the creature of the writer's imagination. Relating the story, Krúdy had to hold several threads in hand: firstly, that of the historical events in harmony with Jászay's and Ortvay's narrative; secondly, motives from other literary works he intended to weave into his own; and, thirdly, that of his own invention destined to shape the whole gathered material into a novel. The quantity of the material he had at his disposal was to the novel's disadvantage rather than to its benefit. In opposition to Scott, Thackeray, or Dickens, Krúdy did not become an expert of medieval times to write his novel: hence, it lacks the necessary foundation to make the reader aware of the enlivened period and its characteristics. Instead, Krúdy felt the obligation to recapitulate them time and again while the story unfolds.

On the horizon of the interpretation of *Hungary in 1514*, *György Fráter*, and *Black Bridegrooms*, the following insights can be formulated concerning the Mohács-trilogy. As a few but clearly identifiable textual similarities testify, Krúdy knew, and quite profoundly, Jókai's *György Fráter*. The diametrically opposite depiction of a number of events may give evidence on Krúdy's ambition for a rivalling narrative in his trilogy. A good basis for the comparison is the figure of King Lewis. In both of the works the fact is mentioned that the basically sovereign king cannot make alone his decisions. The question of who is besides or instead of him in a decision-making position, is answered, however, differently. Jókai without hesitation laid the responsibility at the door of the guardians and the governing council. Krúdy, in his work, touched upon this explanation too, but Lewis himself identifies the constraining force of the ancient laws he knows not well enough as the main hindrance. While in Jókai the young king is but an impotent chessman in the aristocrats' and counsellors' hands, Krúdy rather suggests that the powerful magnates hinder the realisation of Lewis's projects.

Unlike Eötvös, neither Jókai nor Krúdy wrote a guiding foreword, nor hinted at the assumption that historical novels should fulfil any external task or mission. Differently from their antecedent counterpart, they related their novel above all not to the era they lived in. While Eötvös was interested in the interrelatedness of life and novel, the other two were rather concerned about the different amount and quality of latitude art and historiography offer to writers. Jókai and Krúdy stressed the aspect that the gaze of the novelist which is capable of measuring humans' fate is more helpful to elucidate and synthesise the facts recorded by historiography as well as to

unveil their causes. In opposition to them, Eötvös found in the facts reconstructed by historians an adequate guide for understanding the past. While Jókai and Krúdy approached to the historical novel from the novel as such, Eötvös started from social theories and political ideologies. There are no textual coincidences between Eötvös's and Krúdy's novels but similarities concerning the characterisation of figures can be detected.

Irén Gulácsy's work, as contemporary reviewers, amongst them László Németh or Marcell Benedek, noticed it, has but the theme common with that of Krúdy. The value systems contained in the worlds of the novels have no shared elements. Among the values of the life sphere depicted in *Black Bridegrooms* one can mention family, nation, physical strength, and future. The figures of *King Novels* are driven by the desire for happiness and well-being: they are not aiming future bliss but remedy for the evils of the present. Not national but dynastic and individual interests spur them into action.

The conclusion of my dissertation aimed to answer the genre-theoretical question of the position Krúdy's work takes in the threefold interrelatedness of fiction, documentary historical reconstruction, and historical novel. Krúdy started his work not with the intention of renewing the genre of the historical novel or writing a documentary novel: he conceived the trilogy indeed as a historical novel. Actually the work, the author of which concentrated on mere reconstruction of the facts, reveals considerable disproportions at the cost of reflective and fictitious elements. Krúdy did not use at all the writers' right called by James Kerr „the power of the imagination”. Playing out historical reality and fiction against each other had provided Scott's works with a special artistic power which cannot be found in Krúdy at all. That is the reason why there is some inconsistency between the views Krúdy formulated in his novel on the historical novel and the factual trilogy as documentary historical novel. This inconsistency may indicate that the author in this case (unlike in his *Eszter Solymosi in Tiszaeszlár [A tiszaezlári Solymosi Eszter]*) did not chose the form of documentary novel deliberately but he found it during the shaping of the ready-given material. This option was supported also by the voluminous sources at his disposal.

The final text differs from the classic historical novel in its impact as well as its structure. The documentary novel, in Krúdy's case, undertakes but the re-narration of a widely available variant of history. It does not take advantage of the opportunity open to historical novel, i.e. to give the recorded events an alternative meaning by

putting them into unfamiliar, challenging light. The biographical novel, as also *György Fráter* proves it, may be a kind of halfway house between classic historical and documentary novel, since the constant elements does not form in it such a strong network as in Krúdy's variant.

The classic historical novel differs from the documentary novel also in the kind of message transmitted to the readers, since the former one, unlike the latter, offers the readers strategy, patterns of behaviour for periods when their life, as the heroes' and heroines' fate, is suddenly directed by external, ungovernable powers. Different claims to loyalty or conflict between family affinities and moral principles (*Black Bridegrooms, The Heart of Midlothian*) could indeed be well-known problems for the public but Mary's difficulties to gain her family a new province certainly not.

In theory, the writer of the historical novel can dispose over a whole arsenal of written and material sources (Mary Lascelle). But Krúdy drew upon only one segment of them: on narrative sources and images. It is the quotations, information, events from the works of Pál Jászay and Tivadar Ortvy that constitutes the framework of *King Novels* on which the structure of the trilogy was built up. This is the first strand of the novels: the next one is that of the references and cross-references, in which case Krúdy also heavily drew upon his sources. But, as Frank R. Ankersmit put it, it is not enough to insist on the truth of these sources on an "elementary", non-reflected level but the historical novel „may give a quite reliable representation of those generalized types of actuality of a certain given period". The borrowing of these elements did, however, happen in such a simple way and therefore they do not contribute indirectly to the unfolding of a story independent from them which could be essentially different from these elements. Krúdy had not pursued thorough and profound preliminary studies to write the trilogy but he did his best to grasp and stick to facts, established by Jászay and Ortvy, when building the world of his novel. Historical authenticity, however, as Marian H. Cusac put it, concerns not individual facts but the whole historical context.

The step mentioned by Harry E. Shaw, "to give form to history" was performed only imperfectly in this otherwise unsurprisingly formless novel. The next phase ("to give meaning to history") is, however, completely lacking. Krúdy did not seize the opportunity offered by the historical distance to put the events into different perspective. Instead, he tried to efface the signs of this distance. Nor did his sources prompt him to reflect on the nature of history since, as Hayden White stated it, the

double task of historical writings consisting in reconstruction and successive interpretation became the standard method of historians only from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jászay's work is the product of an earlier period: for him, reconstruction was the principal task.

Another reason why Krúdy's work does not fit into the mould of classical historical novel is that it hardly kept the contract Hayden White referred to, established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between authors and bourgeois readers. According to this contract, if readers read the novel in an appropriate way (identifying the historical facts and separating them from fictitious events), they can reach valid and communicable insights in the field of collective (national) self-comprehension, too (Patrick Parrinder). But Krúdy, almost copying works of historiography, missed to perform the task of completing the historical framework with fictitious elements. Instead, he put the ready-made parts just one after the other. This explains why Krúdy's novel, which differs from the Scottian model also in this aspect, has no social dimension.