

DISCOURSE FORMATIONS IN READINGS OF THE *SZINDBÁD* NARRATIVES

ISTVÁN DOBOS

University of Debrecen
Debrecen, Hungary
E-mail: idobos@puma.unideb.hu

This paper delineates critical approaches to the reading of the *Szindbád* narratives by Hungarian author Gyula Krúdy, which basically have tended to assume a balance of the sensual and the spiritual, as well as literal and figurative meanings. I propose an interpretative model focusing on the question as to how an imaginary event exists in the consciousness of a literary character, and how that character's perception can be related in the narrative. There is not much on this short-fiction poetical issue in the secondary literature, much as there is very little on notions of overlaps between reality and fiction or the transformative text-events of becoming a creation.

Keywords: double readability, rhetorical analysis, parody, self-interpretation

Discussion of the theoretical aspects of the issue mentioned in the title of this study is possible primarily in the course of a rhetorical analysis. At this early stage, it might be necessary to highlight among the major conclusions that are deducible from the experience of reading the one that purports a revision of the fundamental interpretative model of morphological structures, which basically assumes the balance of sensual and spiritual, as well as literal and figurative meanings. Although the conventionally accepted metaphors of reading *Krúdy*'s texts are under the "protection" of a perfect unity of images, words, and sounds, the language-oriented formative devices in the *Szindbád* stories hardly present their simultaneous perception as a process void of barriers.

Metonymy: Puppet or Personality?

As regards the issue of the identity of characters, the basic narrative features of the *Szindbád* stories, regarding the metonymical relationship between the narrator and the figures created in the text, are transitions, unmarked viewpoints and switches between parts. In relation to the double readability of metonymy, a reference must be made to the reversibility of the cause and effect relationship between

the inner and the outside worlds, which is concurrent with the round and round of the mutual substitutions between the characters. The interchangeability of the personal traits of the characters is one of the signs of the multiplicity of the worlds imagined, i.e., of the fictional stories within fiction itself, which is a distinguishing mark of the *Szindbád* stories. In fact, *Szindbád* can choose to have one of three occupations after his death: he could become a tin soldier, a back-comb, or a wooden bead in a rosary.

The short story *Utazás éjjel* [A Journey at Night] (1911) presents an elopement by *Szindbád* as if it took place in a puppet show, among the props in the scenery of a model railroad. Seen through the train window, the night landscape seems motionless. Observed from the passing railroad car, the lengthmen, who stand still and stiff, look lifeless: “Egy tanyaház pirosuló ablakával úgy fut a tájon keresztül, mint egy bábszínházbéli kép; egy kis állomáson, egy percig megállottak, az emeleti ablakban két leány ült, varrtak, a harmadik fehér alsóruhában állott a szoba közepén, a függőlámpa alatt, és éppen egy lila szoknyát próbált felvenni.” [With its red window, a farmstead was running through the landscape, like an image from the puppet theater; at a small station they stopped for a minute, there were two girls sitting in the window, sewing, while a third one was standing under the lamp in the middle of the room in her white underwear, trying to put on a purple skirt.] (312).¹ *Mimi*, the eloped girl, has been sitting silently, without as much as a stir, also like a lifeless puppet on her seat, from the beginning of their journey. Getting bored of this game, *Szindbád* changes his mind and informs the girl that he will take her back to her parents by transferring to the train coming from the opposite direction at the next stop. *Mimi* does not respond to this either. This narrative can be interpreted also as a chain of events taking place in the imagination of the person observing the model railroad. At the beginning of the narrative, the listing of a sequence of title variations evokes the announcement of a part or section in a puppet show performed at a fair: “*Curly vagy egy színész története*” [Curly, or the Story of an Actor], or “*Esmond Henrik, Anna királynő őfelsége ezredesének története*” [The Story of Henry Esmond, General of Her Majesty], and, finally, the one considered to be the most expressive of them all, “*A gonosz varázsló, vagy az ártatlanság diadalma*” [The Wicked Magician, or the Triumph of Innocence] (212). On the other hand, the story *Utazás éjjel* can also be read as a parody of elopement.

The so-called *performed narrative* is very close to a dramatic play; in fact, it is a narrative production of a play. It is not only the characters in *Utazás éjjel* (1911) who resemble lifeless puppets, who seem to be the props for the parody of elopement, but also, for example, the grotesque female figures in *Szindbád és a csók* [*Szindbád and the Kiss*] (1911), as well as even *Szindbád* himself, from a certain aspect. One of these two women practices the “mér földjáró csók” [verbatim: mile-long kiss] with *Szindbád* on even days, while the other one does so on odd

days: “*Julcsa harminckilenc, Jella harmincnyolc és fél esztendő volt*” [Julcsa was thirty-nine, while Jella was thirty-eight and a half years old] (65). Not only their age but also their names and looks are similar: both of them “*kövérék, puhák és csókszomjasak voltak*” [were fat, plump, and thirsty for kisses] (65), and “*tűnő nyaruk mulandósága miatt forrasztották hosszadalmasan ajkukat Szindbád ajkára*” [they would stick their lips to Szindbád’s lips for a long time because of the transience of the fleeting summer of their life] (65). These two female figures are distinguished by numbers, which are connected to them randomly and arbitrarily. The numbers stand for persons, or, rather, the persons are substituted by numbers, as if these characters were props, with identification labels attached to them.

The third woman flies in through the window of our protagonist on Saturdays, like a birdbrained swallow. Szindbád falls asleep next to this innocent creature, who keeps observing his face and motionless body with a frightened and cautious look. Szindbád gets disenchanted quickly, and his apathy can also be deduced out of his appearance: “*Szindbád hamar kihűlt, hamar felejtett, és közömbös, hideg tekintete jeges nyugalommal fordult el sokszor látott női szemek sugárzása elől.*” [Szindbád could quickly cool off, he could quickly forget, and his cold and indifferent look would turn away from the radiation of oft-seen female eyes with icy reserve.] (64).

The double readability of metonymic formations based on sheer connectedness makes it possible for the parody on the identity of personality to appear. That is to say, the even and the odd numbers, which are used metonymically to identify as well as to differentiate between the characters, are associated with their bearers quite randomly. The marker is an external marker of the marked entity. The incompatibility of the constituent parts in the marking process is revealed here exactly by the logic that is supposed to be used for restraining the arbitrariness of the language that establishes tameless connections. The critique of metaphors applied for the figural presentation of people is executed through metonymical structures, but this operation is not tantamount to reversing the hierarchy of the two linguistic operations. There is no concord between the statement of the lesson related to the difference between the women and its implemented performance either. Metonymy thus excludes the possibility of a psychological approach to the characters, as the analogy between the number and the corresponding character is purely based on an accidental relationship. The metonymy used for naming the characters has a subversive power, yet it does not erase the rhetorical pattern of reversing and substituting from the literary language. The impersonal number used for *metonymy* here seems to be the *metaphor of the absence of personality* that would distinguish the character.

What is there behind the external features? Is it possible to state anything more specific about the nature of Szindbád’s self? The reiterative occurrence of the

variations of the sentence “*Nem vigasztalta a százhet nő, aki viszonszerette*” [He was not consoled by the one hundred and seven women who reciprocated his love] in the *Szindbád* stories reminds us of the Catalog Aria of Leporello in Mozart’s opera. Don Giovanni keeps an exact account of women seduced by him, whereas it is far from certain that *Szindbád*’s amorous conquests really did take place.² According to the preliminary interpretation in the introduction to this story (see *Tájékoztató* [Information] (1915)), the one hundred and seven women, in fact, lulled *Szindbád* into a numb reminiscence in his imagination [“*képzeldésében kábult emlékezésbe ringatta*”] (14). How does an imaginary event exist in the consciousness of a literary character, and how can that be related in the narrative? There is not too much about this short-fiction poetical issue discussed in the relevant critical literature, just like about the notions of coverage between reality and fiction or the transformative text-events of becoming a creation. Imagination and reminiscence, as well as the fictional and the real are inseparable from one another when following the self-interpretation of the piece.

Repetition: Irony and Recollection

Due to the double readability of repetitive formations, an interplay between pathos and irony expresses the complexity of the behavior of the reminiscing *Szindbád*. The iterative structures present the emotional recollections of the past as a piece of parody. In one single, short passage in *A hídon. Negyedik út* [On the Bridge. The Fourth Journey] (1911), there are four different versions of the description of the narrative situation of retrospection: “*Eszébe jutott fiatal korából egy város, – völgyben és piros háztetőkkal, ahol a barna híd ódon ívei alatt színes kavicsok felett vágtat egy tiszta kis folyó, és Szindbád a híd kőpárkánya mellől álmodozva nézte a messziségben alvó kék erdőket.*” [He remembered a town from his youth; in a valley and with red roofs where, underneath the old arches of the brown bridge, a clean rivulet was rushing over colored pebbles, and *Szindbád* was dreamily watching the blue forests asleep in the distance from the stone ledge of the bridge.] (52)

The basic sentence that expresses a desire to go back into the past is full of pathos, but the repetitive appearances of its versions drive the recollection through irony towards self-mockery: “*a kék erdőket látni a messziségben és a híd lusta ívei alatt serényen utazgató folyót*” [the blue forests can be seen in the distance and the river running past diligently under the lazy arches of the bridge], then “*egy folyó szeli keresztül a várost, és a hídról álmodó erdőket látni*” [a river runs through the town and, from the bridge you can see dreaming forests] (52). In the various repetitive versions, the sequence is continued with the iteration of one of the components of the original sentence, which is sleep and dreaming. Uttering

what speaks for itself also approximates the description of the sleeping town to parody. It seems to *Szindbád* that time has stopped perhaps: twenty-five years ago, he saw the same windows with their closed shutters.

The return of what is not identical with itself offers the semblance of interrelatedness. A basic pastime of *Szindbád* is to be looking dreamily as if brooding for long time periods. The closing of the story means returning to the starting point. The iteration of the basic sentence creates a circular structure, which places the narrated story on a revolving stage, as it were: *Szindbád* “*a régi hídra ment, ahonnan sokáig elgondolkozva nézte az alkonyatban álmodozó messzi erdősegeket. A folyó fürgén futott a híd álmos ívei alatt*” [went to the old bridge from where he was looking at the distant dreamy forests in the dusk for a long time, thinking all the while] (56). The repetitive versions grow out of the sample original sentence, but these cannot be regarded as unified and joining elements that would organize themselves around one single focal point in the entirety of the text. The double readability of the formation of repetition ensures the appearance of parody in nostalgic short stories in search of their subject matters.

One of the basic features of *Krúdy*'s way of writing is the application of synesthesia as related to recollections. Its iterative occurrence also offers the possibility of assuming a parody of the formation. It is striking how the imagined perceptions of various sensory fields, such as flavors, aromas, images, and touches are connected with one another in *Krúdy*'s comparisons and similes. It is typical that, in the individual *Szindbád* stories, it is always different sensory organs that come to the fore in the text. For example, in the story called *Az első virág* [The First Flower] (1911), it is the sense of hearing, the laughter of actress *H. Galamb Irma*, and the joint impression created by these two that are in focus. The repetition of the versions of joint perception places the phenomenon itself into the center of attention ironically, during the course of which an impression perceived through one of our sensory organs evokes the memory or the sensation belonging to another. The single distinguishing feature of this character is that she produces strange sounds: “– *Ah, maga az? ... – kiáltott fel csengő hangon, amely úgy csilámlott Szindbád előtt, mint a folyóvíz a holdsütésben.*” [Ah, is that you?... she exclaimed in a ringing voice, which sparkled in front of *Szindbád*, like running water in moonlight] (310). Not very far from this in the text, the reader can hear *H. Galamb Irma* again, whose name proves to be a warning sign: “Most már turbékolt a hangja...” [Her voice was now cooing...] (310). This actress knows one of *Szindbád*'s tutors, who is specialized in conquering female hearts: “*Tiszteltetem... És csókoltatom – tette hozzá halk kacagással, amely úgy hangzott Szindbád fülébe, mint a gyors tavaszi eső csengése a nyugodt tó tükrén.*” [“Tell him I’m sending my greetings... and my kisses,” she added with a soft chuckle, which sounded to *Szindbád*'s ears like the ringing of fast spring rain on the surface of a placid lake.] (310). The awkward young man, however, does not hear that the

actress has accepted his advances: “– *Az este hűvös – mondta finomkodó hangon, mint a francia szalondarabokban szokás –, Szindbád úr, megengedem, hogy elkísérjen... Szindbád – bár már tizenhat esztendő elmúlt – néha ostobaságokat mondott: – Nevelő uraim a Hársfában ülnek, és bizonyára várnak.*” [“The evening is cool,” she said in a genteel voice typically used in French drawing-room pieces, “Mr. *Szindbád*, I’ll let you escort me... *Szindbád*, although he was past the age of sixteen, sometimes said stupid things, “My tutors are sitting in the restaurant *Hársfa*, and they are probably waiting for me to arrive.] (310) *Szindbád* is wet behind the ears, as it were: he is hard of hearing, and the experienced *H. Galamb Irma* has to take cognizance of this using a more and more inornate voice: “– *Furcsa ember! – mormogta csendesen.*” [“Strange man,” she muttered softly.] (310) The actress makes yet another effort, in a different tone: “– *Remélem, hogy holnap délután eljön hozzám uzsonnázni? – mondta csendesen és komolyan. – Ketvényi urat is elhozzam? – kérdezte Szindbád. Az alacsony nőcske csendesen meghintázta gömbölyű mellét, mint egy madár, aztán közömbösen mormogta: – Ha ugyan eljön az öreg bácsi?*” [“I hope you’ll come and have tea and an afternoon snack with me tomorrow?” she said quietly and seriously. “Shall I take Mr. *Ketvényi* along, too?” asked *Szindbád*. The small cutie silently swayed her round breasts, like a bird, and murmured indifferently, “If the old geezer wants to come at all?)] (311) If the reader associates meanings to go with the voices and calls for the help provided by the system of signs used by pigeons, based on the meaning of the name of this female character, this narrative will read like a parody of bird language. The short story, on the one hand, suggests that the reception of courting voices requires a delicate sense of hearing while, on the other hand, it does not refute the assumption either that education can have a benign influence on sensory perception because, as time passes, *Szindbád* will become better than his masters. The double readability of simultaneous perception allows for both interpretation possibilities. What is realized here is the poetics of tautology, insofar as the short story can be considered as the extension of a self-evident correlation, which goes: in order to hear a voice, hearing is necessary.

Tautology: The Narrative in Search of its Subject Matter

The poetics of tautology manifests itself in expressing the obvious and repeating its variations in the *Szindbád* stories. In narratives searching for their subject matter, the author presents the activity of narrating on a stage, so expressing and relating, as forms of action, play an equal part with that of the story. No value appears to be permanent or solid in the worldview of the narrator. Compulsive retrospection creates a safe haven through the language-related activity against the loss or depletion of personal memories. The poetics of tautology reveals itself against the

alluring nothingness in a *narrative in search of its subject matter*. I do not wish to contend, however, that the *Szindbád*-stories are about nothing, as I think that they are rather about the play of fancy that annihilates nothingness.

In the opening short story called *Iffú évek* [Young Years], the story unfolds from the description of a painting. The interruptions of the presenter relate to the ways of expression, to the narrative activity that purports to appear expedient: “*Ki volt, mi volt a herceg, mielőtt kopottas, aranyozott rámak között elfoglalta volna helyét a régi kolostorban? – ez szorosán nem tartozik e történethez. Elég az hozzá, hogy ott volt, a bolthajtás alatt a falon.*” [Who or what had been the prince before he took his place within the gilded frames in the old monastery? This does not belong closely to this story. Let it suffice that he was there, under an arch, hanging from the wall.] (15) It seems as if the presenter/narrator was proceeding in a strictly straight fashion, yet there is an immediate gap between what is uttered and what is contemplated. Soon after it is announced that diversions will be avoided, we get a detailed description of the figure of St. Anna, visible underneath the decaying plaster of the archway section: “*egy kis zsámolyon üldögélt, az arcát megérintette a régiség, csak két fakó szeme tekintgetett kérdőleg a diákokra, akik a folyosó kockakövein csizmában kopogtak*” [she was seated on a small footstool, her face was touched by antiquity, and only her two pale eyes looked at the students who would clatter on the cobblestones of the hallway in their boots] (15). And then the lean narrative, announced before, turns into a presentation losing itself in so many details. The travesty of laconic expressivity grows into full proportion in the reference to the image of St. George: “*György sárkányát öldökölte*”. [George was slaughtering his dragon.] (15) This piece of information is obviously unnecessary. An image of St. George cannot be of anything else, due to its own essence. The narrator thus is verbose, since he explains one issue or notion with the issue or notion itself. Nevertheless, it is exactly this amount of excess that distinguishes *Krúdy*'s art as a writer. There is much more, and also something different, present here than simply the dissolution of the cause and effect principle or the structure based on temporal connections, or even the lack of pragmatism, as it is unanimously claimed by the *Krúdy* critics and experts.

The way *Szindbád*-stories are written takes us very close to the genre of parody. Still, it is not the constant transition between reality and absurdity that brings forth the effect of ambiguity but rather the interplay between narration and presentation/performance. The possibility of reading *Szindbád* stories as parodies comes from the tension between the actual utterance and the interpretation of the way markers are used.

The personification of the voice coming from the past pushes almost automatically the presentation of *Szindbád második útja* [*Szindbád*'s Second Journey] (1911) to the boundaries of parody at the beginning of the 20th century. The name *Szindbád* is not necessarily supposed to serve the purpose of identifying the char-

acter but rather to expand the limits of the self, in order to multiply the personality. It is more of an empty marker than a proper name, which is why it can comprise the most diverse human characteristic features. It is then the exaggeration, the excessive piling up of the personal traits, i.e., tautology, that turns the characterization of *Szindbád* into parody. The conscientiously elaborated and diversely highlighted psychological portrait becomes distorted after a certain point. Verbosity driven by irony turns against its own objective: it does not create unity and continuity in the personality of the character bearing the name. However, tautology is not merely a waste of verbal expression. On the contrary, the description teeming with attributes, comparisons, and other figures of speech directs the attention not to the complexity of the personality but to the richness of language. Here, the wasteful abundance of expressions is the source of enjoyment, not the psychologically nuanced quality of the profile.

Látott halált, látott születést, esküvőt, házasságtörést és gyilkosságot az erdőben. Egyszer sírt is, pénz miatt véres könnyet sírt, és titokban segített a szegényeken. Imádkozott elhagyott kis templomokban, és orvgyilkosságot forgatott a fejében ellensége ellen. Majd becsületes, nyílt és bátor volt, mint egy középkori lovag. Majd okos volt, mint a kígyó, és mámoros álmokat próbált fejtegetni a másnapokon. Voltak barátai: gőgös nagyurak és bujdosó pénzhamisítók. Egyszer nőrabló volt, máskor otthonülő családapa.

[He has seen death, he has seen birth, adultery, and murder in the forest. Once he even cried; he cried bloody tears because of money, and he helped the poor in secret. He prayed in small desolate church buildings, and he contemplated assassinating his enemy. Then he was honest, open, and brave, like a mediaeval knight. Then again he was clever as a snake, and he tried to interpret inebriated dreams on the days after. He had friends: haughty lords and fugitive counterfeiters. Sometimes he was an abductor, at other times a couch potato of a family man.] (37)

The directionless piling up of elements, working as a parody of enhancement, makes the formation of tautology visible at the climax of the listing: “*Verekedett verekedőkkel*” [He fought with fighters] (37).

Szindbád sets out to find the memories of young age. On the path to his memories, he wishes to emulate his young self in order to re-live his youth. Thus, the reader becomes a part of a mirror-play. It is as if *Szindbád* were the *alter ego* of the unnamed narrator, while the old *Szindbád* imitates his young self, and the young *Szindbád* comes on stage from the perspective of the reminiscer. The destination of the second journey is a small town in the Plains region, where the young *Szindbád* went to see a young girl once at night. The marking of the place and the time is tautological: “*Nyár volt akkor és harmatos volt az éjszaka.*” [It was sum-

mertime then, and the night was dewy.] (38) Uttering what speaks for itself can also be explained through the fact that, to *Szindbád*'s mind "*már semmitem jutott eszébe a régi gondolatok közül*" [nothing/none of the old thoughts came back] (38). So, the short story creates its own world out of nothing: the lack of subject matter and the awkward search for it provide the reason for the story-teller to put the narrating activity itself on stage as well. The description of the figure of the girl unfolds from several clichés: "*Irmának hívták, és barna volt, nagyhajú, és az ajka fölött gyöngye kis árnyék lebegett, mint a fehérbőrű, barna nőknél. Szindbád ezt azóta gyakran tapasztalta.*" [Her name was *Irma*, and she was a brunette with big hair, and above her lips there was a feeble little shadow, like with other white-skinned and brown-haired women. *Szindbád* has experienced this often since.] (39)

Another discursive formation belonging to the notion of tautology, known as the rhetorical question, would also seem in *Krúdy*'s writings to be the manifestation of maintaining narration in search of its subject matter: it is a question only as far as form goes, as it does not require an actual answer: "*– Bacsó kertész az este meghalt. Most virrasztanak mellette – felelte Irma. Vajon azóta még mindig Bacsó kertész mellett virrasztanak a kis kerti házban?*" ["Gardener *Bacsó* died last night. A wake is being held now at his place," said *Irma*. Is it possible that there is still that wake being held at Gardener *Bacsó*'s bedside in the small garden cottage?] (40) The repeated occurrence of a word embedded into a context that brings forth a contrary meaning is supposed to provide glimpses of reverse extremities of life in *Krúdy*. The opposition of hot and cold expresses the well-known inseparableness of life and death: *Szindbád* can feel the kiss laid on the lips of the girl in love and the proximity of the cold dead body laid out next door.

Hot and cold, a sample of *the figure of speech called antonym* also allows for double readability. It is striking how worn out and cliché-like the opposition under scrutiny is, yet it is exactly due to this commonplace quality that its repeated occurrence functions as a piece of parody. The precondition for this transition, however, is for the reader to be able to find the symbolic sense about the closeness of life's extremities. Having properly perceived the travesty of this figure of speech, the reader is not really surprised at the conclusion of the story: after a few months, *Irma*, who has fallen in fatal love with *Szindbád*, of whom she thinks fondly and with gratitude, is taken to the cemetery to be buried. The routine explanation for the suicide of the forsaken girl is presented through a parallel, which formation also requires a double reading strategy: *Irma* poisons herself *after a couple of months*, whereas *Szindbád*, upon learning about her death, does not feel well *for a couple of days*. It is through the choice of reading the unbalanced quality of the parallel as an expression of antinomy that the reader can recognize the ironic tone describing the hasty mourning of her voluntary death on the part of *Szindbád*.

Nonetheless, the question of the relationship between parody and self-interpretation is still to be more thoroughly explored in *Krúdy*-criticism, which is why it is also difficult to answer the question whether the mysteriousness of the personality of *Szindbád* is open towards genuine depths of meaning or simply deceptive and false appearance.

Notes

- ¹ You will find the title of the short story in my text, followed by the date of publication and the page number where the quote is taken from, in the original Hungarian collection Gyula Krúdy, *Szindbád*, coll., ed., epilogue by Sándor Kozocsa, Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1985³.
- ² Kierkegaard discusses the list of the seduced women in great detail. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Vagy-vagy* [Either-or], Budapest: Osiris, 1994, 86–102; especially: 94–9. In Mozart's opera, the own power of sensuality takes care of seducing. Don Giovanni lacks reflection, consciousness, and shrewdness. He does not plot, he is driven by momentary desire, and he “enjoys the satisfaction of lust” (*ibid.*, 97). Kierkegaard even dares to assume that Don Giovanni “does not have time to make a plan beforehand, and he does not have time afterwards either for letting his act become conscious in his mind” (*Ibid.*). His sensuality is musical, and what Kierkegaard means by this is that “it will fade away forever, just like music, which is gone as soon as it is not played, and it is reborn only when it is played again” (*Ibid.*, 100). Perfidious speech and retorting do not benefit it. As opposed to Don Giovanni, *Szindbád* seduces his women by using the power of words, he probes the gullibility of women, and feels best when he can foresee the impact of his words.