

Linguistic Characteristics of Literary Impressionism and the Impressionistic Character of Gyula Krúdy's Style*

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The claim that Krúdy's style is impressionistic in character is virtually contemporaneous with the literature on his oeuvre. In an anthology published four years after the writer's death and presenting the history of Hungarian fiction by way of specimen texts and commentaries, László Baránszky-Jób discussed Krúdy's work in the chapter on impressionism.¹

A year later, the first book on Krúdy, László Perkátai's doctoral dissertation was published.² In that slim volume, not sufficiently appreciated ever since, the author – who was to become a victim of the holocaust a few years later – characterised Krúdy's style, or more exactly, its period following the first Szindbád short stories, as “the most perfect incarnation of Hungarian impressionist prose”.³ Impressionism, he added, was characterised by the superabundance of lyrical and mood-related elements, its major tools being extreme picturesqueness and musicality.⁴ In relation to Krúdy's use of adjectives, the author states that “impressionistic style riots in the free play of the senses. Its main ambition is to seize and relay the whole sensual world as much as possible. Hence, both auditive and visual components are overrepresented in it”.⁵ In the view of this pioneering study, practically the first

* This paper is an abridged version of the author's book: KEMÉNY Gábor, *Krúdy körül. Stilisztikai tanulmányok és elemzések a 20. századi magyar irodalomról*, Segédkönyvek a nyelvészet tanulmányozásához 187, (Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2016). Most examples have been left out for reasons of length.

¹ BARÁNSZKY-JÓB László, *A magyar széppróza története szemelvényekben*, (Budapest: Kir. Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda, é.n. [1937.]) 281–282.

² PERKÁTAI László, „Krúdy Gyula”, in *Perkátai László összegyűjtött írásai 2. Tanulmányok, cikkek, kritikák*, közléteszi LENGYEL András, (Szeged: Bába Kiadó, 2002) 7–79. (First edition: 1938.)

³ PERKÁTAI, *Krúdy Gyula*, *op.cit.* 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ PERKÁTAI, *Krúdy Gyula*, *op.cit.* 60.

Krúdy monograph ever, we can call Krúdy a poet of attributes, similes, and images.⁶

The third author who situated Krúdy among the impressionists was István Pelyvás-Ferenczik whose doctoral dissertation entitled “Impressionism in Hungarian literature and Gyula Krúdy” was published in 1942 in Debrecen.⁷

Two eminent representatives of Hungarian stylistics, Gyula Herczeg and Zoltán Szabó, took sides on the issue by discussing⁸ or mentioning⁹ Krúdy in the chapter on impressionism within their respective monographs. In what follows, I will rely on their research results in surveying the issue, adding my own reservations at the appropriate points.

Gyula Herczeg listed five major characteristics of impressionism in works of fiction.¹⁰

1. Nominal style:

The kind of style in which nominals assume a dominant role at the expense of verbs is called impressionism. Alongside the dominant nominals, linking items (case suffixes, postpositions) occur to a lesser degree, or may even be absent.

Herczeg lists and exemplifies the following types of impressionist sentences exhibiting a nominal style:

- verbless sentences, i.e. ones having a nominal predicate;
- defective sentences lacking a predicative construction altogether: their subject is accompanied by some adverbial;
- unarticulated sentences consisting of a single word each, nouns lacking even an adverbial complement; usually several such unarticulated sentences come in a row;
- such accumulation may go as far as the nouns losing all their independence and referring back, as appositions, to the “head noun” situated at the beginning of the sequence;
- an inorganic sequence of nouns linked to a head noun: suffixes that would make the grammatical relationships unambiguous are missing, hence the nouns “are quasi floating in the sentence”;¹¹ the apposition and its head noun may be torn apart;

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ PELYVÁS-FERENCZIK István, *A magyar irodalmi impresszionizmus és Krúdy Gyula*, (Debrecen: [A] Református Kollégium Tanárképző Int.[ézete], 1942)

⁸ HERCZEG Gyula, *A modern magyar próza stílusformái*, (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1975) 87–104.

⁹ SZABÓ Zoltán, *A magyar szépirói stílus történetének fő irányai*, (Budapest: Corvina, 1998) 185–187.

¹⁰ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza*, *op.cit.* 66–114.

¹¹ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza*, *op.cit.* 76.

Linguistic Characteristics of Gyula Krúdy's Style

- appositions referring to a nominal or pronominal subject that is not present in the sentence but may be implicitly understood;
- abstract nouns in a possessive form (constructions contracted from similes).

2. Sentence structure:

Herczeg points out as a preliminary remark that the sentence construction habits of Hungarian impressionism can be best studied in Krúdy's works.¹² In his view, Krúdy has a bias to accumulation as he tries to pile up the most sensual impressions possible, he sees and presents the world in an impressionist manner. That is, he makes abstract thoughts tangible by small but characteristic details and puts reality together from those tiny mosaic pieces, hence seizing it primarily in a visual manner. This procedure has a parallel in the visual arts: pointillism, a style that represents reality by little spots of paint, by accumulating details. "An impressionist writer approaches human personality through his eyes, the organ of seeing".¹³

With respect to Krúdy's similes, Herczeg states that the simile's subject (the item that is characterized by the simile) is often a word referring to nature or the outward appearance of a person; by contrast, "he often neglects a person's internal world. [...] A visual and auditive approach, accessing the world via one's eyes and ears, predominates with him to the expense of an intellectual approach".¹⁴ In my view, the key is rather that Krúdy characterizes persons from the outside, by their looks. It is a commonplace to question Krúdy's intellectuality, yet the truth is that his approach is not speculative but empirical, not deductive but inductive; in other words: his "intellectual approach" is realized through the visual (or sensory) channel.

In accordance with the foregoing, in Krúdy's sentences **coordination** dominates at the expense of subordination: Krúdy dislikes and usually does not employ the way of sentence building that places subordinate clauses around a single real superordinate clause and that subordinate clauses of diverse levels are linked together on the basis of requirements of content. Rather, he ensures structural unity by a prose rhythm based on repetitions.

It is already in an early paper, in 1951, that Herczeg comes to the conclusion that "Krúdy's style, involving coordination often without using conjunctions, that is, paratactically, is closely associated in this respect with the set of phenomena of a European stream of style known as 'impressionism'".¹⁵

¹² HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 87.

¹³ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 108.

¹⁴ HERCZEG Gyula, „Krúdy hasonlatai”, *Magyar Nyelvőr*, 83(1959) 1. sz. 41–58., 56.

¹⁵ HERCZEG Gyula, „Mondatszerkezetek Krúdy stílusában”, *Magyar Nyelvőr*, 75(1951) 5. sz. 324–332, 6. sz. 420–425., 332.

Later, in his work surveying stylistic forms of modern Hungarian prose, Herczeg says that the fundamental feature of Krúdy's sentences is that however long they are, however endlessly exuberant they appear to be, they consist of short clauses accompanied by very few subordinate clauses, if any: it hardly ever happens that a primary clause has a secondary or ternary subordinate clause. The clauses are typically parts of a huge enumeration, logically independent of one another.

3. *Word order:*

Impressionist word order is noun-centered: adverbials and subjects are foregrounded in a way that subjects are located sentence finally, while adverbials occur sentence initially. An impressionist sentence has two structural poles: it is built on adverbials and nouns. Putting the subject after a number of complements to the end of the sentence serves a consciously delaying purpose. The initial adverbial(s) and the final subject(s) are clearly semantically related.

Word order and accumulation, these two characteristics of impressionist writing, are interrelated. The writer wants to tell us everything he accessed via the sense of seeing: the place, the looks of a person, the way she is dressed, etc. He wants to tell us about all those details as soon as possible and in the most detailed manner. The beginning and the end of the sentence are taken by the most important parts, the adverbial and the subject, respectively, and the predicate itself is relatively backgrounded. The backgrounding of the verb is a consequence of bipolar sentence construction: being bipolar, the sentence "does not tolerate the presence of a third peak, hence the predicate is semantically and characteristically colorless".¹⁶

4. *Free indirect speech:*

Herczeg discusses this as another impressionist feature.¹⁷ However, his examples are not convincing: at the places he refers to, I do not see any shift of perspective. Later on, Herczeg associates free indirect speech with realism.¹⁸ In this view, free indirect speech becomes universally employed in naturalist or realist prose.¹⁹ And indeed: it is markedly present in the lineage Kálmán Mikszáth – Zsigmond Móricz – Ferenc Móra – László Németh – Magda Szabó. Hence, it can by no means be seen as an impressionist feature: its presence cannot be taken to be evidence that the given style is impressionistic. In fact, it

¹⁶ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 109.

¹⁷ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 92–99.

¹⁸ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 13–53.

¹⁹ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 48.

Linguistic Characteristics of Gyula Krúdy's Style

is neither a stylistic feature of impressionism nor that of realism: it is a narrative technique that can be coupled with almost any stylistic trend.²⁰ For instance, the fact that Dezső Kosztolányi usually avoids using it²¹ does not make him either more of an impressionist or more of a realist. It has, incidentally, also been pointed out that Kosztolányi's prose writings exhibit a number of such instances.²²

5. *Pars pro toto*:

It is especially frequent in impressionist style that the subject is replaced by a metonymic or synecdochic expression of the "part for the whole" type (using the name of an object or of a part of the body to stand for that of a living person). The same replacement can also be taken to be an instance of personification. Already Miklós Radnóti pointed out in his doctoral dissertation discussing Margit Kaffka's artistic progress that "visual elements dominate with Margit Kaffka so much that pictorial representation is often akin to cinematographic techniques. The principle of *pars pro toto* of movies shows up here".²³

Zoltán Szabó's synthesis of the history of Hungarian style sees the main characteristics of impressionism in the fact that the impressionist mode of communication is based on some act of remembering, on the evocation of a memory.²⁴ The mood-related content of the memory evoked is not usually expressed in abstract words but by sensual impressions. Thus, a relation of correspondence is created between mood-related content and the relevant sensual impression. That correspondence or association, however, is rather subjective.

Szabó highlights four main linguistic tools of the stylistic rendition of the cult of the senses:²⁵

- synesthesia, mixing of the senses; this occurs elsewhere, too, but is conspicuously frequent with the impressionists;
- high frequency of attributes, accumulation of attributes, garlands of attributes. Impressionism is "a style of attributes";

²⁰ KEMÉNY Gábor, „Szöveg és jelentés: Ceruzajegyzetek egy újszerű könyv margójára”, *Magyar Nyelvőr*, 106(1982) 4. sz. 465–476., 472–473.

²¹ HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 25–28.; MURVAI Olga, *Szöveg és jelentés: A szabad függő beszéd szövegnyelvészeti vizsgálata*, (Bukarest: Kriterion Könyvkiadó, 1980) 36., 131.

²² TOLCSVAI NAGY Gábor, „Alany, szubjektum”, *Irodalomtörténet*, 92(2011) 2. sz. 177–203., 197.

²³ Cited by: HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 112.

²⁴ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 185.

²⁵ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 185–187.

- conspicuous frequency of color names. Radnóti wrote about Kaffka’s style that it was “an orgiastic parade of colors”;²⁶
- longer descriptions “consisting of a series of evoked images of mood. Their source is the **memory** of some sight, [...] some sensual experience, usually **the picture of a landscape or an environment**”.²⁷

The memory evoked is taken by the impressionist writer to be an unarticulated image, a **unit of total imagery**.

The major linguistic means of creating that total imagery are the following in Szabó’s view:²⁸

- enumeration, accumulation, representing the multiplicity of details making up the total imagery;
- nominal constructions, nominal style (the dominance of nouns and adjectives at the expense of verbs);
- synesthesia, but not the kind where senses are mixed but where a unity of aspect is created or indicated, e.g. *white silence* (Endre Ady);
- attribute shift, enallage, e.g. *the green life of a pine-forest* (Lőrinc Szabó).

The primary tool of impressionist style is the word. What follows from this is “free and easy sequences of sentences, and plenty of coordination coming from enumeration and detailing”.²⁹ Rather than *free and easy*, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that a loose, coordinative way of stacking clauses is one of the sources of the musicality of impressionist style, the temper-creating effect of prose rhythm.

By way of a summary, we can say that Krúdy’s literary art undoubtedly exhibits impressionist features, and in certain periods or in specific writings these even dominate.

However, there are also significant considerations that keep us from characterizing Krúdy’s style simply as impressionist without any reservation, as done in part of the literature.

First of all, here is the overall uncertainty of the place of impressionism within stylistic history. Zoltán Szabó discriminates two stages of impressionism: the first extends from 1890 to 1900, and the second from 1900 to roughly 1912.³⁰ The author of that synthesis claims that “in the 1910s, the strength of

²⁶ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 186.

²⁷ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 186. (My emphasis.)

²⁸ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 187–189.

²⁹ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 189.

³⁰ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépírói stílus, op.cit.* 190.

Linguistic Characteristics of Gyula Krúdy's Style

Hungarian impressionism diminished”.³¹ By contrast, Gyula Herczeg opines that “the meridian of impressionism” occurs exactly then: in 1915–16.³² The opposing views of these two excellent researchers of the Hungarian history of style indicates the controversial nature of the category of impressionism.

In addition, the stylistic trend of impressionism is difficult to tell apart from another definitive trend of the period: art nouveau.

The literature emphasizes the following major features of art nouveau:³³

- coordinative sentence construction: the dominance of coordinate clauses over subordinate ones;
- accumulation at all levels of text construction (sounds, syntactic constructions, clauses, sentences, paragraphs);
- richness of linguistic images (especially those concerning the human and the natural sphere);
- large number of attributes, especially those of color and material;
- irony and self-irony in style.

As can be seen, impressionist style has almost exactly the same features³⁴ as does art nouveau: the first, second and fourth items from the above five are essentially identical across the two trends.

A new criterion for telling impressionism and art nouveau apart could be the respective dominance of static images vs. dynamic images.³⁵ The example presented by Olga Murvai (the double portrait of the heroine of Krúdy's short story *Szindbád őszi útja* [Sindbad's autumn course]) convinces the reader of the workability of the distinction of static vs. dynamic image. One of the heroine's portraits, the “external” one, follows the logic of the eye, while the other, “internal” one, follows that of associations. The former is a static image (art nouveau), while the latter is a dynamic one (impressionist). The fact that art nouveau was originally and primarily a style of (interior) architecture and applied arts (for instance, there is no art nouveau music), while impressionism is “the art of the

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² HERCZEG, *A modern magyar próza, op.cit.* 70.

³³ KISPÉTER András, „Az irodalmi és a nyelvi szecesszió néhány kérdése”, in *Tanulmányok a századforduló stílusterképeiről*, szerk. FÁBIÁN Pál és SZATHMÁRI István, (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1989) 36–48.; BENCZE Lóránt, „A szecesszió nyelvi stílusjegyei”, in *Uo.*, 238–244.; SZABÓ, *A magyar szépirói stílus, op.cit.* 172–182; KEMÉNY Gábor, *Bevezetés a nyelvi kép stiliztikájába*, Segédkönyvek a nyelvészet tanulmányozásához XIV, (Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2002) 172.

³⁴ SZABÓ, *A magyar szépirói stílus, op.cit.* 184–186.

³⁵ MURVAI Olga, „Szecesszió – álló kép vagy mozgó kép?”, in *„Arany-alapra arannyal”. Tanulmányok a magyar irodalmi szecesszió stílusáról*, szerk. SZABÓ Zoltán, (Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2002) 148–167., 164.

moment” (hence impressionist painting and impressionist music, but no impressionist architecture that we know of), appears to corroborate Murvai’s distinction and the method of analysis based on it. Whether or not this distinction will be applicable in practice (in the analysis of other authors or other texts) remains to be seen. The research conducted by Olga Murvai who died young awaits continuation.

My opinion, formed decades ago and not changed ever since, is that Krúdy’s style and his world view (both of which amount to the same thing in his case) cannot be satisfactorily described in the conceptual framework of impressionism.

Let us review a few important features of impressionism in general and of Krúdy’s impressionism in particular from the point of view of whether such criteria sufficiently describe Krúdy’s style and whether they make it possible to locate it within the range of impressionism as a stylistic trend. As we will see, the application of these criteria to Krúdy does not always lead to a satisfactory result.

Starting from the richness of linguistic images, it is beyond reasonable doubt that, reading Krúdy, we are immediately faced with the relatively high number of linguistic images (similes, metaphors, etc.) and with their extraordinary contents. However, it is far from being evident that the textual function of that imagery in Krúdy’s work is identical with what is normally taken to be the typical function of impressionist image creation. In that respect, I had cautious reservations in the conclusion of my first book on the subject: “richness of imagery in Krúdy’s work does not merely serve picturesqueness or an impressionistically sensitive capture of sights. It is simultaneously a means of getting away from reality, the transformation of reality into murk, wraith, or ‘subjective reality’. [...] Krúdy’s images are not plastic and tangible presentations of the piece of reality **represented** but rather hidden messages about the writer’s inscape or subjective mental constitution, the **exterioration** of his frame of mind”.³⁶

Later on, I returned to the closely interrelated issues of the function of Krúdy’s images and the writer’s location within the history of style: “No matter how many images we find in Krúdy’s prose, this in itself does not make him an impressionist if those images serve the representation of mood rather than expressivity, abduction rather than approximation”.³⁷ Krúdy’s similes are often “redundant” or “abstract” ones, not comparing something less familiar to

³⁶ KEMÉNY Gábor, *Krúdy képkötése*, Nyelvtudományi értekezések 86, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974) 100. (Emphasis as in the original.)

³⁷ KEMÉNY Gábor, „Krúdy és a stílusa”, *Irodalomtörténet*, 13(1981) 2. sz. 440–457., 451–452.

Linguistic Characteristics of Gyula Krúdy's Style

something more familiar, nor something abstract to something concrete, but rather they compare what is familiar to what is unfamiliar and what is concrete to what is abstract. The predicate of the simile is often metaphorical both with respect to what is compared and what it is compared to, e.g. "Winter stamped its feet like eternity" (*Pesti nőrabló* [The ravisher of Budapest]). Furthermore, some of his similes are completely unmotivated (and perhaps unmotivatable) and can therefore be called "metaphorical" or "identificatory". "Such images are **not** the means of pinning sights down with an impressionistic sensitivity and picturesqueness. The elimination of similarity from a simile signals the advent of a new stylistic attitude: **surrealism**".³⁸

Let us now turn to accumulation, another stylistic device that is highly characteristic of both Krúdy and impressionism. Accumulation, indeed, is one of the most conspicuous features of Krúdy's style.³⁹ Since, however, the function of Krúdy's use of accumulation differs from the function of accumulation within impressionist style, the presence of accumulation as a linguistic device in Krúdy's texts does not entail the classification of the writer as one of the impressionists. "In this textual world, accumulation serves abduction or alienation from reality." "The landscape as it disintegrates as a consequence of the use of accumulation becomes a vision and a projection of mental processes: what seemed to be impressionism turns out to be **surrealism**".⁴⁰ Similar views can be found in other authors' work, too. Ede Szabó in an essay mentions "sternly dithyrambic, often surrealistic pouring of metaphors" as a feature of the third, deepest, most hidden, "demonic" stratum of the oeuvre.⁴¹ Imre Bori spots the traces of a "surrealistic" view of the world especially in the Vienna novels (*Vak Béla* [Bela the Blind], *Nagy kópé* [Sly dog], *Őszi versenyek* [Autumn races]).⁴² Zoltán Molnár finds "surrealistic images" in Krúdy's short story *A helyettes halott* [The surrogate dead man].⁴³

In sum: the high frequency of linguistic images and the writer's partiality to accumulation do not make Krúdy's style impressionist. The reason is that these linguistic devices do not have the same function in his case as they do in typically impressionist authors (like Árpád Tóth or like Margit Kaffka in her prose works). Consequently, I maintain my earlier view that "the use of

³⁸ *Ibid.* (Emphasis as in the original.)

³⁹ Cf. PETHŐ József, *A halmozás alakzata: A halmozás fogalmának, típusainak és funkcióinak vizsgálata* (Krúdy Gyula Szindbád ifjúsága című kötete alapján). (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2004)

⁴⁰ KEMÉNY, *Krúdy és a stílusa, op.cit.* 454. (Emphasis as in the original.)

⁴¹ SZABÓ Ede, „Ábrándok és démonok: Krúdy Gyuláról”, *Új Írás*, 18(1978) 10. sz. 65–70.

⁴² BORI Imre, *Krúdy Gyula*, (Újvidék: Forum, 1978) 183–184.

⁴³ MOLNÁR Zoltán, „Szürrealisztikus képek Krúdyknak »A helyettes halott« című novellájában”, *Magyar Nyelvőr*, 100(1976) 3. sz. 296–305.

‘pointillist’ accumulation, the picturesque way of seeing things and loosely coordinative sentence construction as typical stylistic traits are indeed present in Krúdy’s work but their function points beyond impressionism – toward a *par excellence* twentieth-century kind of modernity”.⁴⁴

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My major publications on this topic:

KEMÉNY Gábor, *Krúdy képköltése*, Nyelvtudományi értekezések 86, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974)

KEMÉNY Gábor, *Szindbád nyomában. Krúdy Gyula a kortársak között*, Linguistica Series A. Studia et Dissertationes 7, (Budapest: MTA Nyelvtudományi Intézet, 1991)

KEMÉNY Gábor, *Képekbe menekülő élet. Krúdy Gyula képköltéséről és a nyelvi kép stilisztikájáról*, (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1993)

KEMÉNY Gábor, *Bevezetés a nyelvi kép stilisztikájába*, Segédkönyvek a nyelvészet tanulmányozásához XIV, (Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2002)

KEMÉNY Gábor, *Krúdy körül. Stilisztikai tanulmányok és elemzések a 20. századi magyar irodalomról*, Segédkönyvek a nyelvészet tanulmányozásához 187, (Budapest: Tinta Könyvkiadó, 2016)

⁴⁴ KEMÉNY, *Krúdy és a stílusa*, *op.cit.* 457.