

MÁRAI'S NOVEL OF THE HUNGARIAN BOURGEOISIE

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On February 27, 1989 I received the following letter:

"Dear Mr. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák,

I would like to apologize for not having responded to your letter of last December. I have been ill, and so I could not carry on my correspondence.

It would be a pleasure to me to see you at my place. May I ask you to call me as soon as possible? My non-listed number is (619) 276-1072, and you can reach me any evening.

With kindest regards,

Sándor Márai"

Several stamps can be seen on the envelope. First the letter was sent to Lanesville in New York state, and later to South Bend. "Your mail delayed due to incorrect zip code", reads one inscription. "Always use zip code", reads another.

The letter reached me three days after the publication of an obituary in the San Diego Union which had been dictated by me on the phone, one day after Márai committed suicide – an end he predicted in *The Blood of San Gennaro* (1965), an autobiographical work which identified a writer's death with the beginning of his exile.

Time is irreversible, and sometimes a message may reach the addressee too late. The concluding part of Márai's *roman à fleuve* was due to appear in the spring of 1948, but it was not published until 1988, when Stephen Vörösváry-Weller, the author's closest friend, made the whole work available. On the dust-jacket of the two volumes, printed and bound with great perfection, an engraving can be seen by a Dutch master, showing Kassa in the 16th century.

Since the author made very few alterations to the text in the last forty years, *The Work of the Garrens* can be viewed as a novel written between the late '20s and 1946. Still it is impossible to forget about the political changes of the last decades when reading Márai's longest work of fiction. At the time it was completed, the Hungarian bourgeoisie had been undergoing a deep crisis. Four decades later, the same class could be described as belonging to a closed chapter of history. Because of this changed perspective, Márai's novel has become a memento of the irreparable loss caused by political persecution. It reminds us of the sad fact that after World War II a substantial part of Hungarian society had disappeared: some were killed, others died in pri-

son or in deportation, still others were forced to flee the country, and the nation could never recover from the effects of this tragedy.

In the Introduction, written in 1988, Márai suggested two possible starting-points for the interpreters of his novel. On the one hand, he argued that political dictatorship remained the same in the 20th century, despite superficial changes; on the other hand, he pointed out that a creative bourgeoisie had been replaced by a consumer middle class. Although it could be maintained that the value of these conclusions was questionable, since they were formulated four decades after the novel had been completed, it is worth remembering that self-interpretation plays a major role in *The Work of the Garrens*. Being a strongly confessional writer and influenced by Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, Márai took a firm stand against those who insisted on the primary importance of plot in 20th-century fiction. For him the secret of writing novels lay not in inventing an action full of surprises but in the art of variation. Accordingly, the five later parts of *The Work of the Garrens* can be regarded as different interpretations of the opening section, "The Rebels", first published in 1930.

On one level, this introductory part is about growing up. Márai's analysis of the process leading from intimacy to homelessness has superficial resemblances with Musil's *Törless* and with *Les enfants terribles*, a short novel written by Cocteau the same year "The Rebels" was composed. More useful could be a comparison with *Kornél Esti*, since Kosztolányi and Márai were close friends and shared intellectual values and interests. Both could be called nihilists in the sense that they questioned the relevance of Christianity. Yet the difference between their attitudes is significant: far from accepting Kosztolányi's irrationalism, Márai's belief was firm in the power of reason. His adolescents' rebellion is a mirror image of the aimless war fought by their fathers. What is more, the young boys' "action gratuite" is self-destructive and becomes manipulated by an actor whose character foreshadows the portrayal of the "Führer" in the later parts of the novel.

Unlike action, point of view is a crucial element of Márai's art. Its variability can make a character complex – as in *Peace in Ithaca* (1952), the first novel Márai wrote after he had completed *The Work of the Garrens*. Yet the changing perspective never suggests the relativism of all values, which is undeniably characteristic of *Kornél Esti*. Despite all reservations expressed about Ulysses by his wife and two sons, the mythical hero is made a representative of secular reason, self-irony, and freedom of will, just as Julius Caesar remains a ruthless dictator, notwithstanding the petty selfishness of all Roman citizens, in *Something Has Happened in Rome* (1971), a parable which contains a criticism of the political compromises made by Gyula Illyés and László Németh, in the decades following 1948.

Márai fully understands the psychology of not only adolescence but also unreasoning enthusiasm – in this sense the opening section of *The Work of the Garrens* anticipates the highly imaginative, yet brilliantly controlled presentation of collective madness in *Judgement in Canudos* (1970) – but he associates irrationalism with the loss of personality and the danger of despotism. The rebels' target is the law formulated by the fathers. The anarchism of the younger generation is considered a *sine qua*

non of growing up. In other words, *The Work of the Garrens* starts as a novel of spiritual education. Yet the continuity characteristic of *Bildungsroman* is soon broken. There are twenty years between the last events narrated in "The Rebels" and the first episode of "The Jealous". At the age of 37 Péter Garren is still confronted with the dilemma of his early years, a period in which he was associated with a group of rebellious adolescents. To distance himself from the anarchism of his youth, he decides to become a businessman and settles down in Germany. Yet he cannot forget about his past. He has a strong desire to become an artist, and is aware of the connection between creativity and the demonic forces of destruction. Learning about the fatal illness of his father, he must return to his home town. His German mistress warns him that those who have left their homes are destined to be alien in this world: "For you there are two seasons, two homes and two worlds. You will miss both and you are destined to become an eternal wanderer. Never can you unpack your things."

These words, written around 1937, are of crucial importance. While the first part of *The Work of the Garrens* ends with the return of the parents from World War I, symbolizing the restoration of a "grown-up" world, the second part speaks about the final disintegration of order. "What will happen if father dies?" The question asked by one of the Garren brothers is about the possible loss of all end-values.

Part III, "The Aliens", is a flashback which makes the reader aware of the deeper significance of the father's approaching death. No historical or geographical names are mentioned, but it is obvious that the father is the last representative of an organic bourgeois culture, and the aliens are foreigners whose aim is to convince the original population of the city that occupation should be viewed as liberation. The oppressor tries to justify his act by maintaining the superiority of his values. The oppressed has a limited choice. Tamás Garren becomes a traitor by joining a movement led by a "Führer", his sister Anna turns her back on the world and sinks deeper and deeper into provincialism, and Péter decides to settle down in another country. "We all die because of Trianon", said Kosztolányi on his deathbed, as reported by Márai in a newspaper article published on September 4, 1938. When writing "The Aliens", the author drew upon his memories of Kassa under Czechoslovak rule, but his intention was to characterize the creator and the destroyer of a culture in a general sense.

For Márai foreign occupation is a state of mind, a form of collective consciousness. In his novel the oppressor's aim is to obliterate the memory of the past. In the central episode of "The Aliens", a piece of sculpture is swept away from the top of the cathedral by a tornado. The cathedral, built in the 13th century, is a powerful symbol of the continuity of the bourgeois culture of the city. When it is hit by a storm, the new rulers of the country fail to restore it. The degradation of the traditional centre of the city starts simultaneously with the illness of the head of the Garren family. By the time Péter Garren has left his adopted country for his fatherland, his father is almost dead.

Márai regards the fatherland as a chronotope. From his perspective Hungary is not only a spatial but also a temporal configuration. The message comes too late for Péter Garren: by the time it reaches him, the fatherland has ceased to exist. Realizing

this, he sets himself a difficult, perhaps even impossible task. His desire is to reconstruct the past sunk into oblivion, restore the sense of continuity, and create a work of art which would give some idea of the culture of old Hungarian towns to future generations.

In his attempt to reach his goal, he is confronted with a dilemma. Remembering his rebellious youth, he realizes that the bourgeois and the artist live in incompatible worlds. The former belongs to an organic community which has specific laws and duties, whereas the latter seeks originality and prefers anarchy to order. The fourth part of Márai's novel is written in the first person singular; it is the tortured confession of a man with a double identity. The memory of the scene in which an actor forced his will upon young boys reminds the hero of the demonic element in art. Péter Garren is aware that creation involves a dangerous game with irrational forces. What is more, he knows the difference between culture and art, craftsman and genius. His aim is a synthesis of bourgeois morality and artistic creation. Drawing inspiration from such bourgeois artists as Goethe and Thomas Mann, he rejects the view that writing is a mission, a form of salvation or prophecy. For him creation is a mere life style and mode of existence. Some may find his conception of art limited, but he feels justified in view of the political implications of irrationalism.

These implications are emphasized in the fifth part of the novel, which contains two long scenes. The first is a visionary presentation of a "Führer" talking to the participants of a mass demonstration, whereas the second is about the visit Péter Garren pays to the famous writer Berten, who is held in house-arrest by the authorities. Both are based on private experience: in January 1933 Márai attended the meeting held in the Berlin Sport Palace, where Hitler made a speech, and later he interviewed Gerhart Hauptmann about his attitude towards the Third Reich. Both incidents had been reported by Márai in articles published in newspapers before they were transformed into parts of his novel. In their fictionalized versions they have a secondary meaning which goes beyond their original historical context. Hitler's name is not even mentioned in the novel, and the scene in which he succeeds in manipulating his audience is a variation upon the chapter in "The Rebels" in which an actor mesmerizes a group of adolescents. Fanatics lose their personality, and are controlled by "the centre", that is, a small group which has power and is alienated from the people. The meeting of the two writers has also a general import: Berten's hypothesis is that only those communities whose memory is discontinuous can be manipulated from above. In other words, despotism is based on the destruction of historical consciousness, the distortion of collective memory.

One of the clichés of Marxist historiography is that Hungary has never had a bourgeois culture. Márai's aim is to prove that precisely the opposite is true. The ultimate irony of his novel is that it is the shocking portrayal of the decline and fall of this bourgeoisie in "The Survivors", the conclusion of *The Work of the Garrens*, which must convince the reader that one of the worst consequences of political oppression has been the transformation of Hungary into a country with a history of backwardness.

For forty years the works of Márai have been inaccessible in Hungary. No other Hungarian writer has ever had such a fate. The reason for this distortion of the past is quite obvious: those critics and historians who identified Hungarian culture with the traditions of the gentry could not find a place for a writer whose works were in sharp contradiction to their sweeping generalizations. As far as I remember, in recent years Péter Esterházy was the only major writer to draw inspiration from Márai. Although I regard Márai's absence from Hungarian cultural life as an irreparable loss to the nation, it gives me some consolation that the writer who may be the most important living Hungarian author carries on Márai's tradition in both a moral and an artistic sense, by making no political compromises and by dedicating himself to the Hungarian language.