

## Sándor Márai on Julien Green

A writer with a German style learned background, Sándor Márai spent the 1920s in Paris and wrote about events of French politics, art and literature in Hungarian and German papers as their “Paris correspondent”. His familiarity with French literature cannot be, however, attributed solely to a journalist’s interest in it – it grew in parallel with his gradual estrangement from German expressionism. Through following Hungarian literary traditions and getting acquainted with the newest developments of English and French literature, he “classicizes” his own avant-garde and works out his own strategy of narration. An integral part of this process is his attempt at shaping in prose, namely, in novel form, the linguistic and personality crisis diagnosed at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, reckoning with the crisis of the life style of the bourgeoisie and attempting to describe how foreignness is becoming universal. It is during this process, which is the main theme of Márai’s novels until the 1940s, that he turns to contemporary French novels – he devotes a lot of his thinking to these novels’ notion of the subject, structuring of time, and conception of space and time, juxtaposing all of these with the impulses he receives coming from the contemporary Hungarian literature. Two details need to be emphasized here:

(1) Márai does not seem to respond to French surrealism, as German expressionism and its roots (Nietzsche’s philosophy and Freud’s psychoanalysis) distract him from automatic writing but relate him with the Austro-Hungarian artistic initiatives of the turn of the century.

(2) As he has a personal interest in the theme of the disintegration felt in the bourgeois world, he interprets with recognition those works that are able to present the model-like nature of the conflicts pressed into a narrow space – be it family storm-centers, small town stories, misshapen emotions trying to break out of a family or a small town, or the fleeing of the young generation into morbid games.

The above topics signal the French authors whom Márai takes up to mediate to the Hungarian readers throughout the 1920s. All that needs to be added to this is what Márai considered important as well: how the literature connected seemingly to the realist novel tradition can rid itself of its “realist” bindings and how, looking beyond the surface events, it can depict the breakdown of the individual’s communicational attempts. I need to add that even though François Mauriac’s, Julien Green’s and Paul Claudel’s name and works are often mentioned in Márai newspaper articles, essays, other papers, and his diaries which he started keeping in 1943, he does not discuss them as representatives of a Roman Catholic literary tradition, even though he acknowledges their religious commitment.

This is in spite the fact that in the interwar period, especially perhaps in the 1930s, there is a growing interest in neo-Catholic literature in Hungarian literature as well. In 1935 Béla Just publishes a book on contemporary French Catholic literature,<sup>1</sup> Albert Gyergyai provides an overview of the history of the contemporary French novel through 1936,<sup>2</sup> and in 1937 a doctoral dissertation is published in Budapest which discusses the French literary formations of the novel subject that is of interest to Márai, too.<sup>3</sup> The crisis of the family signals, at the same time, the universalizing of the existential crisis – and this is what both literary research and Sándor Márai's self-interpreting reading find elucidated, among other works, in Julien Green's novels. François Gachot, who taught in Hungary at the time, introduced Julien Green to Hungarian readers back in 1927,<sup>4</sup> and a doctoral dissertation was written about him in Debrecen in 1943.<sup>5</sup> In this light, it seems natural that, fighting his own problems of creativity processes, Márai follows Green's creative career with attention, continuously reflects on his novels, and juxtaposes the 20<sup>th</sup> century dilemmas of history telling with his portraits of Green. (I want to add here that the first Green novel, *Adrienne Mesurat*, published in Hungary with the title *Adrienne*, came out in 1931.)

It is clear from Márai's essays and newspaper articles written about Green that, even though he usually reports on the reading of one of his novels, he is familiar with the whole of Green's work and is most interested in the way of writing that is created from the contrasting representation of the surface and deep structures. Márai publishes his thoughts on the main characteristics of the novel *Leviathan* in 1931.<sup>6</sup> He describes at length the small French town which provides the atmosphere for the plot, and qualifies it as "superb" from this aspect. The depicted subjectivities can be viewed as a "clinical picture", and this way we talk about the "disease of the French small town". The final conclusion: "Its mood is tragic and cruel. Everything which was not left here as a historical memento of by-gone eras or as a gift of nature is bleak and lacking in charm." This is not said in order to justify a romantic viewpoint but as a critic's differentiation between forms of existence independent of people versus those dependent on them. In contrast with the closed forms of creations of history and nature, "affairs" created by people are notable not for their openness but for their turning against themselves, and are, thus, manifestations of a tragic existence whose tragic nature is to

<sup>1</sup> Béla Just, *A modern francia katolikus irodalom I* (Budapest: Pázmány Péter Irodalmi Társaság, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Gyergyai, *A mai francia regény* (Budapest: Franklin, 1937).

<sup>3</sup> Anne-Élisabeth Kurzweil, *La crise de la famille dans le roman français contemporain* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1937).

<sup>4</sup> François Gachot, "Julien Green," *Nyugat* II (1927): 74–75.

<sup>5</sup> Sára Kölönte, *Julien Green* (Debrecen: Városi nyomda, 1943).

<sup>6</sup> Sándor Márai, "Leviathan," *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* No. 130 (June 10, 1931): 4.

be found in being forced into existence. Márai might believe Green to be closer to existentialism than how we see him today – the universality of sin increases the actions of petty characters exactly in the narrowed space of a small town.

Márai's review of *Le visionnaire* is from 1934.<sup>7</sup> In it Márai clearly disassociates Green's novel from naturalist epic poetry, even though classifying it under naturalism would be tempting for the critic on the basis of learning about "the depiction of little lives in the framework of a small French town". In place of the outward approach, Márai recommends the acknowledgement of the author's "vision", that "demonic apparition" which is "throbbing behind the realistic and gloomy 'reality'...". He talks about a "depiction of an age" again, naming the thematic predecessor of the small town story as Flaubert's novels. The contrast between the "banality" of the story and the "strange restlessness" or "anxiety" of the characters presents the dream versus reality dichotomy from another point of view, or a formation of 20<sup>th</sup> century realism according to which the essence of the novel is a "vision", and where the author–narrator presents a "dream play" and "the realistic elements of reality are no more than parts of the set". I want to point out that, on the one hand, contrasting the conscious with the unconscious points in the direction of Freud's psychoanalytical narrative, and, on the other hand, Márai finds "anxiety", which can presuppose Heidegger's *Angst* as ever-present in existence (and can take us all the way back to Kirkegaard), and through it he refers to the situation of the "self", defenseless against the realm of dreams and the unconscious. He also points out the peculiarity of the narration in his review, referring to André Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs* (Márai read a lot of Gide) and calling the procedure "the double mirror technique" through which "we see Manuel, the hero, in two different lights, first it was Marie-Thérèse who spoke, then Manuel, and finally it is the little girl's notes that reflect the story from a different angle". Narrating in different ways the same line of events occupied Márai's thoughts as well, and he experimented with changes of aspect and with various means of mediation (letter, diary, retrospection) in his novels. In connection with Green's novel what interests Márai most is how the usual dream versus reality duality can be depicted in connection with the questions regarding the individual subject, that is, how the visible and hidden "essence" of the world can be depicted without the turns in the plot distracting attention from the ways of presentation. The question asked in the review is as follows: what kind of narration is required by the replacement and replaceability of the dream (or vision, in Márai's choice of words in accordance with the title of the novel) and the so-called reality? The fact that Márai involves André Gide's novel in his interpretation indicates his ease at using non-avant-garde epic formations destructing traditional ones.

<sup>7</sup> Sándor Márai, "Le visionnaire," *Ujság* No. 73 (April 1, 1934): 37.

Márai wrote his review of Green's novel *Minuit* in 1936.<sup>8</sup> He must have considered this review very important and typical of himself, since he included it in his 1946 collection of essays *Inspiration and generation* (*Ihlet és nemzedék* in the original Hungarian).<sup>9</sup> Here he essentially summarizes everything that he wrote about Green before and considered especially important from the point of view of his own novel writing. He emphasizes that it is not the plot that is a really important component of the novel, but the (seeming) contrasts that lie between the statements and their symbolizations. In Márai's concept the dream "characteristics" of the novel make it irrevocably impossible to enforce a realism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sense of the word. Here it might be worth quoting Márai at greater length:

Green succeeded with the impossible: he mixed the two unmixing materials, dream and reality. The world is not only what can be seen, tasted, smelled and touched of it but all those forces and tempers, too, from the intention and swirling of which the vision of reality is condensed. In this dream people really live and die, and in this life the fine, moon-colored veil of dream covers also the two hundred pound body of the court servant who delivers criminal citations. It's a very beautiful book. It's like traveling somewhere, to a country where it's very warm but where the sun never shines.

I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that, in fact, Márai sketched the main lines of the book which he himself would like to write, or at least he was experimenting writing with in the first half of his career. At the same time, such an artistic creed names those authors who are important for Márai, and even though they belong in a different literary world, they can be related to 20<sup>th</sup> century existence in their way of asking their questions, whose writings (although probably not the topics) Márai can associate with, and mediating whose art (for Hungarian literary circles) can turn out to be useful. The general Hungarian literary interest in adapting ways of French neo-Catholic writing indicated at the same time a certain significant lack in Hungarian literature in the 1930s. Narrative works relating stories similar to those of French small town family stories were present to some extent in Hungarian literature, but in the form created by Mauriac and Green they were mostly absent. Another narrative strategy promised to be very edifying, namely, the strategy which resulted in a turn in the French novel history, which had very strong realist–naturalist tradition, during which the thematizing of this tradition also led to the deconstruction of it through writing. Márai aimed at something similar in 1930, and in order to underpin his attempts better he started familiarizing himself with English and French novels. Naturally, other essayists and novelists among his Hungarian contemporaries were doing

<sup>8</sup> Sándor Márai, "Éjfél", *Ujság* No. 95 (April 25, 1936): 5.

<sup>9</sup> Sándor Márai, *Ihlet és nemzedék* (Budapest: Révai, 1946), 211–212.

the same: Márai's selection of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce from literature in English and of Proust, Duhamel, Gide, Giraudoux and Montherlant from French literature, in addition to the authors already mentioned above, indicate an independent-minded critic who searched for narrative strategies (rather than models to follow) at the scene itself during his stay in Paris in 1923–1928 and then during his relatively frequent visits there in the 1930s. He wanted to be confronted with everything that was happening in French and English literature. In his writings about Green he wrote about and checked his own ideas of narration and his own interests. Márai's readings in French literature and his attempts at creating a new novel formation in Hungarian are happening at the same time.

This is well demonstrated in his diary entries on diaries of French authors. Beginning with 1943, with his inner emigration, and then with his outward emigration in 1948, the diary became Márai's personal genre. He made notes of his travel, cultural and personal "experiences" in his extensive diaries – except that these diaries are not continuous narrations of stories but excerpts, or rather mosaic pieces, which are placed next to each other but which do not yield a whole story and depict an individual subject who searches for and cannot find his own place. An individual who presents a mode of existence typical in his personal fate and in his emigration, whose existence in cultural space is his protection against a crisis-consciousness and crisis spreading not just in culture but also in the world. Márai's diary which he kept from 1943 through 1989 shows a writer who gets separated from the empirical reader by the historical circumstances and who, despite this, is writing to a hoped-for future reader (and not "for the desk drawer") who will decipher his message and follow the twists of his fate with understanding. Márai does not want to convince with his diaries but to describe the ways of survival. And as the title of his book about his European travels of 1946–1947 attests, *The stealing of Europe (Európa elrablása)*<sup>10</sup> is the failure of the Faustian human being, considered the very essence of Europeanness and a closing in of European culture. In the face of all of this Márai expresses his faith in the past of culture and watches the formation of the future with interest. In this string of diary writing actions, he is aided by the diaries of French authors – he reads and comments on the diaries of André Gide, Montherlant, and Julien Green with unfaltering interest. What concerns outward form, Márai's diaries can be compared to Green's, which he comments on as follows:

Green complains in his diary: he feels like somebody is trying to overhear his private conversation now, when he knows that parts of his diary will be published. [...] we always write for the public.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sándor Márai, *Európa elrablása* (Budapest: Révai, 1947).

<sup>11</sup> Sándor Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1945–1946* (Toronto: Vörösváry, 1991), 82.

When Márai writes this, his publicity in Hungary has not closed down yet, it has only become somewhat limited. But this remark of his remains timely in his emigration as well. Just as Green had carefully edited his diaries, so had Márai: he reworked his simple sentences and sudden ideas into continuous text that can be published. He did this even when he did not yet have a publisher for his texts. His dialogue is only seemingly a conversation carried out with himself.

He created his dialogue situation as a reader, he always reflected on his readings. In his diaries we can sometimes see how his opinion of his readings changes: we can see how, as he progresses with the novels and diaries (of Green's, for instance), he accepts or rejects the influence of what he has just read (notes like this can be found even in entries from the 1950s).<sup>12</sup> And while he reads, he constantly modifies his conception of world literature and opinions in connection with various genres. Already back in 1943 he had a concept of the form of the diary he kept, but it can hardly be debated that this concept was strongly shaped by his readings in French literature. It is probably fair to say that Julien Green's work was not the most important for him (even from among the French authors: he both wrote more about André Gide and was more deeply touched by Gide's conception of antiquity), but it would be a mistake to deny that he considered Green to be one of the very significant authors. Both a "visionary" depiction of the theme of the small town and of the family, and the replacement of dream and reality interested Márai. The way the personality gets lost in the world and in tempers and how he himself gets lost in his own anxiety can be found in his novels as well. Although as a meticulous reader of his, he never identified with the world of Julien Green, but recognized it as offering an interesting alternative of a 20<sup>th</sup> century non-realist novel formation to Hungarian readers and literature.

*English translation by Anna Fenyvesi*

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<sup>12</sup> Sándor Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1950–51–52* (Toronto: Vörösváry, 2001), 13, 263, 265–267.