

The Assessment of Sándor Márai in the Communist Press (1945–1948)

Gábor Reichert

Abstract

Sándor Márai's assessment in the communist press between 1945 and 1948 well exemplifies the methodology used for the development of propagandistic enemy image. The examples mentioned in this paper point out the pragmatism of the system: sometimes the primary purpose of the image that the contemporary party press depicted about Márai was to assign a face to impersonate the abstract concept of "civilian middle class", and sometimes to present a deterrent example for the elimination of the institutional system of "civilian world".

Keywords: Sándor Márai; Hungarian Literature; Literature after World War II; Communist Press; immigration

Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL: Language and Literature – Studies of Literature – Hungarian Literature

DOI: 10.36007/eruedu.2021.2.58-66

No more than three weeks after the termination of the battles of World War II in Europe, Szabad Nép – the now legally issued daily newspaper of the Communist Party – started its press campaign against the diverse trends of the artistic direction which now became branded as "civilian". The article entitled *The Death Mask of Babits* by Márton Horváth is one of the earliest massively publicised printed expressions that exemplify the long-term – although later temporarily shelved due to "Popular Front policies" –¹ concepts of communist culture policy. According

¹ A possible explanation for the issue of the article could be that György Lukács, who was responsible for the development of "popular front policy" in the field of culture, did not return to Hungary yet by the time of the publication of Horváth's article in May 1945. The Death Mask of Babits uses a much more militant approach, and outlines a much more "linear" artistic ideal than the rest of the similar texts published by other communist cultural politicians in the coalition era. Márton Horváth's article was probably conceived before the development of the official party policy concerning culture (which basically postponed the "resolution" of artistic matters until the completion of the political takeover), thus it could happen that its "validity" was temporarily suspended for a couple of years by the appearance of Lukács. However, as Mátyás Domokos points out when citing József Révai in his study, by the time of the Lukács-debate in 1949–1950 at latest, it became obvious that substantially, the leader circles of the party only considered the communist "popular front" cultural policy as a temporary solution, which explains "why the silencing of the majority of Hungarian writers and the »transition« of the institutional system of literary community [...] was postponed until the year in which the events took a new turn". (Domokos 1986, 284)

to Horváth, everyone and everything, from the abstract creative arts, through the theatre of Ferenc Molnár, up until the “veterans of Western civilian democracy”, are literally classified among the “ghosts of the past”, who are collectively incapable of serving the real artistic needs of the era. The symbolic figure of this behaviour, which according to Horváth, contemplates exclusively on the past in a provocative manner, is embodied in Mihály Babits, while among those who are still alive, Sándor Márai is selected for the role of the primary scapegoat. Horváth already mentions the writer in this article:

The most assertive of civilian writers, Sándor Márai already makes statements. He promises to come out of his ivory tower to finish the third volume of *The Confessions of a Civilian*. He professes faultless sentences about bridges that fell into the Danube, and about the dead of the Tunnel, whose gaze is fixed upon the sky. His words and sentences are beautiful, just as the green and golden flies that land on the bodies of the dead. (Horváth 1945a, 5)

These couple of sentences practically incorporate the central motives of the anti-Márai press campaign that the communist culture policy led between 1945 and 1948. For example, the “Ivory Tower” as a proof of the writer’s aristocratic thinking and his disdain towards simple people is already mentioned here, just as the use of the term “civilian writer” in a dehonesteing sense. (However, Márai very precisely mentions this in his diary in 1945: “»Civilian« – they say, triumphantly, as a blood libel, just as they would say: »thief and assassin« They are practically incapable of saying anything else, but during a revolution, it is sufficient for the creation of an indictment.” [Márai 2006, 354]) Another typical feature is to refer to aesthetic beauty and to the creation of “faultless sentences” as sinful acts – of course, this method of the communist critics of the era was not exclusively used against Márai. However, the motive of complete insensitivity towards the victims of the war – as further on we will see – is just about to become a specific anti-Márai allegation in the communist party press of the coalition era.

It is worth taking a look on what “statement” and what kind of “faultless sentences” are those that made Horváth so upset when referred to in his article. The May 13th issue of *Magyar Nemzet* that was restarted in May 1945, published an interview with Sándor Márai, in which the writer talks about the necessity and methods of artistic engagement, and in connection with them, also about a possible sequel to *The Confessions of a Civilian*:

L’art pour l’art literature cannot be just a program; a writer has to participate in the labouring of the nation, to make contributions in order to help the nation to have clear vision about their situation, about the requirements that these new times demand, and about the inner powers that are necessary to fulfil these requirements. Our first assignment is probably analytical. We have to show to every level of the Hungarian society, what kind of mistakes we have committed in the past, thus initiating the process of inner revision that is so necessary. (ff. j.] 1945, 4)

Márai's objectives that are declared here do not really deviate from what Márton Horváth expects from the literature of the "new age": conformity to this different age, review of previous mistakes, and rejection of "l'art pour l'art literature". Thus, the conceptual nature of the anti-Márai statements is substantially obvious: the writer's declaration and concept about his own mandate is apparently ignored upon the creation of his official image. It becomes even more conspicuous if we decide to trace down the "faultless sentences" about "the bridges that fell into the Danube, and about the dead of the Tunnel" that the cultural politician refers to. These are found in the first two pieces of the four short Márai poems published in the May 20 issue of *Magyar Nemzet* – and in the same year, also included in the *Book of Verses*:

One

This was the bridge. It's where you walked at full moon.
 – The handsom slowed down at halfway –
 Built by Adam Clark, and the age of reformation.
 Gulls floated above its arches
 Many suicides bent through the railing
 Now both suicide and barrier lays in the water
 Cool wind rushes through the Tunnel
 Touching the hair of the bodies of the dead.

Two

Beware, you step in blood, this is the muddy
 Bastion, the dead still gaze at the sky
 From which smoke signal sends messages to the sky
 [...]

Of course, we should not be surprised that the above passages do not satisfy Horváth, however we have every right to be startled when he seemingly ignores the fourth poem, published at the same time, which could serve as a posterior explanation to the naturalistic city descriptions of the previous pieces, and which – by a less repulsive medium, of course – could be interpreted as the writer's ardent creed:

Four

Don't hush, heart! Don't forget! In forgiveness'
 Thin juice don't dissolve this charge
 Don't let lukewarm indifference and misery
 Dilute sulphuric acid into holy water
 Burn, like oil tower, madly leaping
 Flame, which cannot be put out by shifty breeze

Crackle, sparkle, remain flaming ember:
Non-atoned hot, wild signal. (Márai 1945a, 4)²

Márai's role as a scapegoat has been already decided by this time, and the fact that his statements and poems indicate just the opposite of what Horváth's article suggests concerning them, cannot change this at all. In the same year, Márton Horváth dedicates another article to Márai: the criticism concerning the Diary of 1943/44 is published in the 1945 December 2. issue of the Szabad Nép. Here, the withdrawal into an ivory tower and the lack of solidarity towards the victims constitute the basis of the argument, and the time period in which Márai wrote his text provide an appropriate pretence:

The subject of Márai's new book is no other than 1943 and 1944: two of the darkest years of our millennial history. Through these weeks and months he proves that he can be faithful – to himself. He places the memory and the beauty of voyages and the silence of books between himself and the world, which threatened the whole nation with ultimate destruction. At least in these aspects, he longs to resemble Goethe, who directed his admiration to the red scales of the fish flickering in a basin while listening to the distant battle sounds of the French Revolution from Verdun. (Horváth 1945b, 4)

Thus, the lined guide is present: in the following period of time, the articles dealing with Márai depict an image of an intellectual snob to the readers of communist newspapers, who locks himself up in his ivory tower. Márai's diaries – whose new entries are regularly published by Magyar Nemzet between 1945 and 1947 – provide a constant offensive ground for his critics, whose writings are typically just variations of Horváth's train of thoughts.³ A picturesque graphic illustration of this is provided by Magda Hauswirth (1947) in Pesti Izé, a joke magazine, where two quotes from the diary – which are independent of each other – are combined in a shared image:



² The first poem published in Magyar Nemzet bears the number thirty-three, the second one thirty-four, the third one thirty-five, and the fourth one thirty-eight in Márai's *Book of Verses* also published in 1945. (Márai 1945b, 39, 40, 41, 44)

³ Some examples from the investigated time period: Nagypál (1946), Goda (1946), Szigeti (1947), Pálóczi Horváth (1947), Király (1947), Pálóczi-Horváth (1948), Németh (1948), Sós (1948), Lukács (1948a).

The edge of the caricature comes from an apparently manipulative technique (which is actually transparent, as the page numbers of the quotes are present), when entries with different subject are presented in a shared composition. The illustration is a precise reflection of the endeavour, whose primary purpose is to question Márai's credibility as a human person while in addition ruining his artistic credits too. Horváth's criticism also provides examples to this:

If we know those texts of the Master from 1943, which are not written for the secret drawer of his desk but for *Pesti Hírlap*, published in hundreds of thousands of pieces, distancing behaviour and literary gentility are both less persuasive. Be aware, that every bullet would hit the heart of an enemy! – he yelled in a Sunday article of *Pesti Hírlap*, which could even make Magyarország jealous. (Horváth 1945b, 4)

The quote is inaccurate, and – as András Nyerges (2016), the excavator of this article points out – dating it to 1943 is also incorrect, since the quoted sentence was published one year earlier, in 1942. Horváth also ignores the context of the quote: Márai's note, entitled *The Bullet Astray* was inspired by the case of a lunatic shooter at Rákospalota, who although was unarmed by the arriving authorities, but during the gunfight a policeman candidate was killed by a stray bullet. Thus, the point of inspiration for the article is not the war, however, Horváth is not inaccurate in the aspect that Márai's train of thoughts – in a rather artificial and unlucky manner – changes direction at the end of the article, and the author encourages to persistence in the battles on behalf of the endangered nation. The incriminated closing sentence of the text is actually written as follows: "Let it be military, economic or spiritual munition: the weapon must point at one exclusive target, the heart of our shared enemy." (Márai 1942, 5)⁴ Thus, Horváth could be able to catch Márai, still, subsequently, the suggested image of the writer is not based on his imperfect activities as a publicist of *Pesti Hírlap* before March 19. 1944.⁵ There is a much greater emphasis on his passivity and on his voluntary withdrawal from the public sphere following the German occupation. As an example, Mihály András Rónai recalls his personal memories in order to illustrate this, in an article written as a reaction to Márai's controversial writing from 1947, entitled *Eupalinos*:

I recall that night at the editorial office, when two of my young colleagues came back sadly, carrying the manifesto against an infamous legislation, for which they collected signatures: Bartók signed it, Kodály signed it – Márai did not sign it. I recall that bitter night, when at the "company enclosure" with a fellow poet we thought that our free writer laureates could speak up for us, and that next day, when I escaped from the enclo-

4 By the way, Márai refers to Horváth's criticism in his diary, however, he denies the existence of the mentioned sentence: "Communist newspapers fervently attack my »Diary« and my person. The instrumentation and phraseology of these attacks clothed in costumes of criticism is spookily identical to the fascist offenses that were issued against each of my books just a year ago and before that. [...] However, one of my Hungarian communist offenders goes further than any of the fascists: »quotes« such a – militant instigation-like – sentence from one of my alleged articles, which I never wrote! All of this could be easily refuted: but what would be its point?" (Márai 2006, 353)

5 See also: Mészáros (2020)

sure to pay a visit at Sándor Márai. My fellow writer laureate welcomed me with compassion, and in a touching tone he described how weak the influence that his words have at the competent authorities is, although – just in case – he offered me some money. [...] However, from all this – in my opinion – it is clear that although Sándor Márai cannot be considered as fascist (among others, due to his own sense of taste, and his accurate sensibility which seemed to reach catharsis at the German occupation, when with a brave gesture he almost ostentatiously became mute as a writer): it is also confirmed that instead of being a morally inspired leader of the civilian middle class from whose blood he was born and from whose spirit he arose, he was just a reliable scribe and faithful chronicler of them. (Rónai 1947, 2)

This last sentence highlights another accusation that is often mentioned in the contemporary articles, namely, the assistance to the crimes that the “civilian middle class” committed in the past. Through the person of the writer, it is actually the concept of “citizenry” itself, and its associated culture, attitude and lifestyle that gets in the crossfire of the attacks. One can observe a distinct interlocking of the contemporary concept of realism established by György Lukács, the principle of collective guilt, and the lines of propaganda concerning citizenry: Márai, along with the rest of the Hungarian creative artists, is primarily defined by the limitations of his social class, thus he is not capable of anything but to become a “faithful chronicler” of this social stratum. (By the way, this “tied up” condition – which, in a certain aspect also victimizes the writer – is also often mentioned in the articles: “Márai – is still just Márai, and there is nothing to marvel at” – writes Márton Horváth [1947b, 4]; “Yes, on the whole world, the *gentleman wrote*, and we cannot blame the writers, just as we cannot be mad at mushrooms when they become mushrooms after being released from a mushroom-growing facility” – argues György Pálóczi Horváth [1947, 609].) However, according to the official communication, the discrediting of “civilian middle class” from power is the equivalent of their total termination, thus the social class that Márai is about to address and to “represent” is either already extinct or just an adverse vestige of the past. As István Nagypál summarizes it in his discourse concerning the diary of 1943/1944 – adding that by his opinion the class of citizenry not only doesn’t exist at present, but it actually never did:

[Márai] Emerges as a representative of a non-existent Hungarian social stratum – the educated, traditionalist patrician citizenry – however, the patrician lifestyle that is so desirable for him, only existed in Hungary in individuals or in small groups at best, and these were also absorbed into the middle- or into the ruling classes. As a matter of fact, this social formula only existed in Márai’s illusion, as its constitutional forces lacked the most important element that raises a social layer into a class: class consciousness. Márai created the illusion of Hungarian upper citizenry during his lengthy stay abroad, and upon his return he had to experience that this social stratum actually does not exist, thus it cannot have any role either. (Nagypál 1946, 314)

Márton Horváth also explains Márai’s inopportune assessment by the extinction of citizenry – in fact by also questioning its existence in Hungary:

In the western sense of the word, upper citizenry was always scarce and still hardly found in Hungary, however, they have their own literature, or rather a writer. Márai's nostalgic desire for a cultured and restful civilian life is utopistic, and it actually does not resonate or find support in the vestigial upper citizenry, but in the lower citizenry and intellectual classes instead, which turn towards the West, which they imagine in their miserable dreams with just as nostalgic hankering as Márai does. (Horváth 1948, 49)

Thus, the elimination of the “old world” inevitably results in the ultimate termination of the platform which Márai previously was able to speak from, and which neither has actuality, nor reality in the “new world”. Certain entries of his contemporary diaries attest that Márai saw this issue similarly, namely, he recognized the pointless nature of his authorial expressions in the social transition of post-war era:

The time of my relevance has expired in Hungary, and the literacy, whose attendant I was, also became obsolete, just as the class, whose times are gone, and which I belong to [...] My books fall into the trashcan of time, my oeuvre could either get into the depository or to the garbage dump... but there's no point to be offended, since it could be the sacrifice I had to offer in order to launch the Hungarian Nation on a journey that leads to the release of a new kind of literacy. Since nothing but literacy can set this nation free. My class created a lot, but still wasn't able to complete this – the release of the whole nation of Hungary by the power of education – due to class interest. It requires payment. Well, I'm willing to pay. (Márai 2008, 216)

It is worth paying attention that here Márai himself literally accepts, indeed, even practices the class-based reasoning of his critics. It is all the more an important moment, since this assimilation of thinking is the reason that leads to the acceptance of the inevitability of immigration by the end of 1948. The ever weakening opposition against it can be well traced through the diary entries.⁶ Initially, he considers the criticism of communist press – if ever mentioning them – as evident, however incidental offenses, thus he doesn't really take these upon himself, resisting the diversion from his original intention, which was to stay at his homeland.⁷ He reaches the above mentioned train of thought when he realizes and validates the logic operating behind the offensives that he previously considered as sporadic. This realisation passes off in multiple stages, through such moments as György Lukács's criticism (1948b), which serves as inspiration for the following diary entry: “I am beheaded by the literary Pope of the communists, an aesthete returned from Moscow, named György Lukács in their newspaper” (Márai 2008, 57). An even more relevant date however is the 25th of March 1948, when the nationalisation of the

⁶ For the further stations of this see Györfy 2020.

⁷ Two examples from the investigated time period: “In the official communist newspaper, a critic pronounces my whole oeuvre as »noxious« literature. That is a frank opinion. An honest conversation always makes me calm.” (Márai 2008, 68); “In his censure, the critic of the official communist newspaper establishes that the second volume of »The Resentful« is »a finely polished nothing, no more than air that spreads with invisible ease, although foul-scented. There is only one thing that is lower than its political and human quality – its authorial quality.« That is a frank opinion, and reading such honest words always pleases me.” (Márai 2008, 104)

enterprises with more than 100 employees – including the Révai Brothers Literary Institute; Márai’s publisher – is ordered. According to the diary, the nationalisation serves as an ultimate argument to Márai for leaving the country. Here, I also have to mention the series of articles that the communist party press issued as offense against the actual publishing structure, whose creation was entrusted to Imre Keszi by the editorial of *Szabad Nép*, and in which Márai is also selected to be one of the main references. In general we can establish that these articles condemn the publishers that are (re)initiated after the war to operate on a mercantile basis because of their market-oriented approach, and appealing primarily on popular education aspects they try to specify which pieces of work promote, and which hinder the development of the country. In the light of the previous facts, it isn’t hard to find out, which category Márai classifies into:

There is not much to debate about the criteria of necessary books. They are literary pieces of art with artistic value, progressive spirit and deep humanistic content, either by Hungarian or foreign, classical or modern authors. What do we consider as noxious literature? Those books that display the opposite of the above listed characteristics, however those books, in which the trap of ingratiating, attractive, seemingly artistic form conceal a spiritual emptiness or God forbid, reactionary content are even more destructive. Should we name Sándor Márai as first? He also has his companion. The doubtful dignity of the publication of these work pieces to a squeamish and malicious audience can be especially attributed to Révai Publishing so far. (Keszi 1948a, 9)

This line of thought condemning not only Révai Publishing but also their “squeamish and malicious” audience while classifying Márai’s works as “noxious” literature does not leave many doubts concerning the future. The article apparently fits into the press campaign preparing the nationalisation of the publishers, just as Keszi’s writing two months later, entitled *Classics in the basement*, which among others, accuses Révai Publishing that they only publish the works of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Zola as an alibi to “cover” the publication of the works of Márai, Sándor Török or Camus (Keszi 1948b, 10). From the point of the termination of his publisher, the situation is obvious to Márai: as an independent writer, he has no place in Hungary.

Sándor Márai’s assessment in the communist press between 1945 and 1948 well exemplifies the methodology – which was also used beyond the time period illustrated in the essay – used for the development of propagandistic enemy image. In my opinion, the above mentioned examples in particular point out the pragmatism of the system: sometimes the primary purpose of the image that the contemporary party press depicted about Márai was to assign a face to impersonate the abstract concept of “civilian middle class”, and sometimes to present a deterrent example for the elimination of the institutional system of “civilian world” – especially including the book publishing structure of the previous era.

Bibliography

- Domokos Mátyás (1986): *Leltárhiány*. Újhold-Évkönyv 1/2, 249–287. p.
- [f. j.] (1945): *Márai Sándor megírja az „Egy polgár vallomásai” harmadik kötetét*. Magyar Nemzet 8/10, 4. p.
- Goda Gábor (1946): *Márai Sándor: A nővér*. Forum 1/4, 378–380. p.
- Györfly Miklós (2020): „A fordulat éve” Márai pályáján (1947/48) a naplók tükrében. In Kosztolánczy Tibor, Reichert Gábor, Szávai János (eds.) *„maradj izzó parázs”. Tanulmányok Márai Sándor életművéről*. Budapest: Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Társaság, 281–295. p.
- Hauswirth Magda (1947): *Ki mikor boldog? Két maradéktalan idézet Márai Sándor „Napló”-jából*. Pesti Lzé 2/13, 5. p.
- Horváth Márton (1945a): *Babits halotti maszkja*. Szabad Nép 4/54, 5. p.
- Horváth Márton (1945b): *Márai naplója*. Szabad Nép 4/206, 4. p.
- Horváth Márton (1948): *A magyar demokrácia irodalmi életének mérlege*. Csillag 2/3, 49. p.
- Keszi Imre (1948a): *Tervszerűséget a könyvkiadásba! Tallózás a rossz és drága magyar könyvek között*. Szabad Nép 7/50, 9. p.
- Keszi Imre (1948b): *Klasszikusok a pincében*. Szabad Nép 7/90, 10. p.
- Király István (1947): *Irodalmunk tekintélye*. Társadalmi Szemle 5/10, 684–696. p.
- Lukács György (1948a): *Az élősdiség lázadása*. Szabad Nép 7/298, 25. p.
- Lukács György (1948b): *Márai új regénye*. Forum, 3/2, 127–133. p.
- Márai Sándor (1942): *Az eltévedt golyó*. Pesti Hírlap 64/37, 5. p.
- Márai Sándor (1945a): *Verseik*. Magyar Nemzet 8/16, 4. p.
- Márai Sándor (1945b): *Verses Könyv*. Budapest: Révai.
- Márai Sándor (2006): *A teljes napló 1945*. Budapest: Helikon.
- Márai Sándor (2008): *A teljes napló 1948*. Budapest: Helikon.
- Mészáros Tibor (2020): Van-e két Márai Sándor? Egy átlagosnak induló év a bírálatok középpontjában. In Kosztolánczy Tibor, Reichert Gábor, Szávai János (eds.) *„maradj izzó parázs”. Tanulmányok Márai Sándor életművéről*. Budapest: Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Társaság, 91–103. p.
- Nagypál István (1946): *Márai Sándor: Napló (1943–1944)*. Társadalmi Szemle 4/4, 314–318. p.
- Németh Andor (1948): *A népi demokrácia és az irodalom*. Népszava 76/78, 11. p.
- Nyerges András (2016): *Kihez mi méltatlan?* In *Színünk és viszályunk. Írások magyar írókról*. Pécs: Kronosz. 312–315. p.
- Pálóczi Horváth György (1947): *Úr ír. Jegyzetek Márairól és a mai magyar irodalomról*. Forum 2/8, 607–614. p.
- Pálóczi-Horváth György (1948): *Márai Sándor: A sértődöttek [sic!]*. Csillag 2/1, 58–59. p.
- Rónai Mihály András (1947): *Márai vagy az allegória*. Politika 1/17, 2. p.
- Sós Endre (1948): *A népi demokrácia és az irodalom. Zárszó a Népszava ankétjához*. Népszava 76/122, 10. p.
- Szigeti József (1947): *Márai Sándor: Medvetánc*. Forum 2/5, 391–394. p.