

Identity Politics and the Literary Canon: Sándor Márai's Place in the Hungarian Literary Canon

Tapatybės politika ir literatūrinis kanonas:
Sándoro Márai vieta vengrų literatūros kanone

MAGDALENA GARBACIK-BALAKOWICZ

HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute for Literary Studies

magdagarbacik@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1910-5446>

Abstract: The paper examines the place of Sándor Márai (1900–1989) in the Hungarian literary canon, specifically, in the context of the discussion on the canon and national identity in the former Eastern Bloc countries after 1989. It draws on the understanding of the canon as a tool used to propagate a certain model of identity within a given society and shows how Márai's work has been used in socio-political debates at different periods of his career and posthumously. The paper offers a historical perspective and analyses the different stages of Márai's career: the path to recognition by critics and readers in the 1930s and 1940s, the period of the communist anti-Márai campaign, the period of exclusion from the literary canon, and the great comeback in the 1990s. The paper points to the main aspects that have affected Márai's reception, and outlines the reasons behind the objections to his oeuvre. The analysis indicates the social, political and historical contexts that affect the different (re)interpretations of Márai's work and his place in the canon. The paper concludes that, despite the writer's posthumous literary comeback and international success, his place in the Hungarian literary canon has not been established yet; therefore, it is necessary to take a fresh approach to his work.

Keywords: Sándor Márai, Hungarian literary canon, canon revision, identity and politics.

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Anotacija: Straipsnyje pristatoma Sándoro Márai (1900–1989) vieta vengrų literatūros kanone po 1989 metų Rytų bloko šalyse prasidėjusio nacionalinio kanono ir tapatumo persvarstymo kontekste. Kanonas traktuojamas kaip tam tikros tapatybės sklaidos visuomenėje priemonė; atskleidžiama, kaip Márai kūryba vertinta kintančiose sociopolitinėse aplinkybėse įvairiais jo gyvenimo tarpsniais ir po mirties. Pasitelkus istorinę perspektyvą, analizuojami skirtingi rašytojo karjeros etapai: kelias į kritikų ir skaitytojų pripažinimą XX a. 4-ajame ir 5-ajame dešimtmečiuose, komunistinės kampanijos prieš rašytoją laikotarpis, dekanonizacijos laikotarpis ir didysis sugrįžimas į literatūrinę apyvertą 10-ajame dešimtmetyje. Straipsnyje nurodomi pagrindiniai aspektai, turėję įtakos Márai recepcijai, išdėstomos priežastys, kodėl jo kūryba vertinta prieštaringai. Analizėje įvardijami socialiniai, politiniai ir istoriniai kontekstai, kurie darė poveikį skirtingoms Márai kūrybos (re)interpretacijoms, jo pozicionavimui kanone. Prieinama prie išvados, kad, nepaisant pomirtinio Márai literatūrinio sugrįžimo ir tarptautinės sėkmės, jo vieta vengrų literatūros kanone tebėra neapibrėžta, todėl būtina į jo kūrybą pažvelgti naujai.

Raktažodžiai: Sándor Márai, vengrų literatūros kanonas, kanono revizija, tapatybė ir politika.

Introduction

Two main factors influenced discussions around the canon in the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe. These were the democratisation of the Eastern Bloc after 1989, and the influence of Western canonical debates. Changes in literary life and literary studies meant primarily the abolition of censorship, the integration of émigré literature into national literatures, the decentralisation of literary life and institutions, and the rejection of the socialist canon. However, the debates on the literary canon have not yet ended. In the early 1990s, discussions about the national canon focused on its reconstruction after 40 years of ideological oppression. However, in a short time, these discussions changed direction. The reason for this was the identity discourse in Central and East European countries, which began to raise numerous questions about the identity of the nation, its constituent characteristics, and the place of post-communist countries in Europe (Bakuła 2011: 19). Since we are not a socialist nation, what kind of nation are we? Disputes between traditionalist and liberal groups that were characteristic of interwar and even 19th-century debates have been revived. Bogusław Bakuła points out that in the first 20 years of the independence of the Eastern Bloc countries, the discussion over the national literary canon oscillated between

closed and open format (Ibid.). This dynamic reflects the presence of different views on national, religious and gender identity, and the fight for the right to represent national values. Bakuła's argument is also true after another ten years. As Aleida Assmann states, 'the canon is a tool of identity formation' (Assmann 1998: 59). When there is no consensus in society regarding the national identity, there can be no consensus regarding the national canon. To put it another way, there are many canons, i.e. many tools through which different groups impose and propagate identity models.

The canon as a cultural phenomenon (Guillory 1993; von Heydebrand 1998) serves to control meanings. It is a 'usable past' (Gorak 1991: 87), an active form of collective memory, a so-called 'cultural working memory' (Assmann 2008: 100) that defines and sustains the identity of a particular group, by connecting the present with the past. For every group, the canon is the repository of knowledge and the embodiment of its history (Szegedy-Maszák 2008: 184–185). But the canon can also create meanings (von Heydebrand 1998: 617–618), and thus can be used in the discussion on what the future should look like. Different canons of different social groups, with different world-views regarding the past, the present and the future, are difficult to harmonise with each other. That is why in Central and East European countries, the national canon became a tool of political agitation, frequently used in political disputes.

Although in each Central and East European country the canonical debate looked different due to the local historical and political contexts, we can speak of a common feature in these debates. The pluralistic fragmentation of the post-1989 literary canon did not prove to be a peaceful process enabling the acceptance of different literary works. Rather, the process has led to the divergence of canons. The contemporary discussion can be generally characterised as a clash of two paradigms, traditional and postmodern. In Central and East European countries, the discourse on the literary canon is motivated primarily by political and world-view factors, and often operates in the realm of politics and arguments of an ideological and moral nature, rather than the realm of aesthetics and arguments about the literary value of a work.

In the perspective of the canonical debates in Central and Eastern Europe, the case of the Hungarian writer Sándor Márai (1900–1989) is quite specific. After 1989, he not only returned to the canon of Hungarian literature, but also posthumously enjoyed unexpected international success. Since the late 1990s,

his works have entered the literary scene around the world, and he has become the most translated Hungarian writer. His career has followed an unusual path. The writer was born in 1900 in the multi-ethnic Kassa, nowadays Košice in Slovakia, which at the time was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He died in exile in San Diego in 1989. The 89 years of his life and career were marked by both enormous success and harsh oblivion. This paper examines Márai's place in the Hungarian literary canon throughout the 20th century and in the last 30 years. How have changing social ideals and national narratives influenced the discourse on his work and his place in the literary canon? Why and how did he lose his place in the canon after the Second World War? And has the post-communist revision of the literary canon restored his place in the history of Hungarian literature and enabled his full comeback as a writer? I seek answers to these questions by tracing the subsequent stages of Márai's career, and placing them in their social, political and historical context.

Journey towards the canon: Márai's career in the 1930s and 1940s

In 1928, Márai returned from his first youthful period of emigration, which lasted nearly a decade. At that time, in the 1920s, he was a publicist, keenly engaged in a wide range of topics, who travelled across Europe and the Middle East. He published not only in Hungarian newspapers, but also in German and Austrian dailies, most importantly in *Frankfurter Zeitung und Handelsblatt*, one of the most prominent daily newspapers of that time. Although in the early 1920s he published two volumes of poems and one novel, his career as a writer started only with his return to Hungary. In 1928, the year of his return, he published the novel *Bébi vagy az első szerelem* (Baby or First Love), which was very well received by the public and critics. As Csilla Tóth points out, the beginning of the 1930s, or more precisely the years from 1930 to 1935, played a key role in Márai's reception in terms of his canonisation and his image (Tóth 2019: 7). In the 1930s and early 1940s, his work became part of the public-political discourse on social class at that time. His highly popular and best-selling novels contributed greatly to the social inclusion of the *polgár* class. The term *polgár* is of great importance when analysing Márai's works and reception,

as well as the canonisation and decanonisation processes. However, the term is loaded with historic, political, economic and cultural variability in the Hungarian social context. As Ernő Kulcsár-Szabó emphasises, ‘Compared to Márai’s notion of “polgár”, *bourgeoisie* is too economic, *citoyen* is too political, *middle class* is too socially broad, and *Bürgertum*, which is the closest to it, is too heterogeneous’ (Kulcsár-Szabó 2011: 556). Márai’s most important book that deals with this term in particular, *Egy polgár vallomásai*, has not yet been translated into English, and there is a lack of English-language research on his notion of the *polgár*. We can translate descriptively the Hungarian term used by Márai as ‘non-noble upper-middle class’. However, this translation lacks literariness, and it would be hard to use in the title of his most important novel. With these terminological problems in mind, I will use the original Hungarian term in this paper.

In the 1920s, the meaning of the term *polgár* changed. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the *polgár* still was a part of a heterogeneous Hungarian middle class (*középosztály*). During the interwar period, Hungary was known as the Kingdom of Hungary, a conservative, nationalist and anti-communist, but at the same time actually authoritarian, regime under the rule of Regent Miklós Horthy. As Tóth points out, after the First World War the *polgár* become a stigmatising term that, through various conceptual identifications, came to mean ‘Jew’, ‘liberal’ and ‘communist’. Individuals who identified as *polgárs* were placed in opposition not only to the middle class, which was narrowly understood as Christian gentry, but also in relation to the Hungarian nation itself (Tóth 2019: 175). The narrow concept of the nation led to increased nationalism, which negated the concept of the multinational state where citizens have multiple identities (social, ethnic, religious). In literary life, a division emerged that reacted to this social situation. On one side of the literary scene there was *népi irodalom* (the literature of the people), and accordingly *népi írók* (writers of the people), and on the other side there was *urbánus irodalom* (urban literature) and *urbánus írók* (urban writers, writers of the city). The distinction shows differences in views on Hungarian modernisation and development in every aspect of social, economic and cultural life. These two groups also had different views of literature and its role. Writers of the people represented radical, some of them even populist, views on social progress, and in their work they focused on Hungarian traditions and traditional values. In opposition, urban writers represented liberal views, and believed that the right path for Hungarian society,

and literature, lay in building relations with Western Europe and recognising the common European cultural heritage. Literary functions were also understood in relation to the changing social situation. The dominant function of Hungarian literature, taken over after the 19th century, was the nation-building function. In opposition, an aesthetic function emerged at the turn of the century. The main forum proclaiming this new function of literature was the journal *Nyugat* (West). Its main aim was to follow and promote in Hungary the latest literary and philosophical developments from Western Europe. The main function of literature was seen here as purely aesthetic. Towards the end of the 1930s, this radically aesthetic approach softened. In the 1930s, a third function developed, the function of the formation of the identity and the representation of different social classes. We can speak of literary representation in the case of three classes: the *polgár* (the non-noble upper-middle class), the peasantry, and the workers. The most important literary representations in the interwar period were: for the *polgár* Sándor Márai's *Egy polgár vallomásai*, for the peasantry Gyula Illyés' *Puszták népe* (People of the Pusztá), and for the workers Lajos Kassák's *Egy ember élete* (A Man's Life). These works became 'part of the symbolic war of social representation' (Tóth 2019: 14).

Egy polgár vallomásai enabled Márai's canonisation. First, the novel played a key role in the social debate of that time. It was part of a larger movement, which aimed at both broadening the social perception of the nation and (re)creating the widely recognised middle class. Second, the novel played a key role in Márai's reception. His social entanglement determined his reception for decades, and labelled his other works 'variations on the same theme', which had a negative impact on the reception of those works. The reception of Márai at the time largely contributed to this image. Critics recognised not only the novel's aesthetic value, but also its influence on the social discourse. They praised its objectivity and accuracy in analyses of social relations (Zsolt 1934; Rónay 1934; Barabás 1934), and placed the novel in the category of urban, even non-fictional literature, on the border between art and sociology (Újvári 1934; Molnár 1934). Some critics saw its role not only in the recreation of the earlier meaning of the middle class but also in the creation of a new European-minded citizenship (Molnár 1934). *Egy polgár vallomásai* was a huge success, which brought Márai a large readership. He became one of the most popular and widely read writers in the 1930s and early 1940s. At the same time, his work began to be translated.

By 1945, translations of several of his novels had been published in languages such as French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Czech, Italian, Swedish and Finnish. The culmination of the process of the transition from a popular journalist to an acclaimed writer came when Márai became a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1942. Membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences can be seen as symbolic recognition of his place in the canon of Hungarian literature.

Thwarted career: the transitional period 1945 to 1948

The first years after the end of the Second World War, as in other countries that came under the influence of the Soviet Union, were characterised by the gradual takeover of power by the Communist Party, and the sovietisation of various areas of social life. A coalition government, in which the Communist Party played a significant role, governed Hungary. The years 1945 to 1948, in the history of Hungarian literature, are described as the 'three-year literature' (Erdődy 2007: 438–453; Schein 2010: 853–870). The period was marked by a certain dichotomy in cultural and literary life. The reconstruction of the system of cultural and literary institutions began in the first months after the end of hostilities, in which literary magazines were the main medium. Looking at the literary scene at the time, it can be said that various groups representing specific views on literature were largely revived, and divisions between the various formations remained valid. This refers mostly to the division between writers of the people and urban writers, which defined the Hungarian literary scene in the interwar period. At the same time, however, periodicals and publishing houses of the Communist Party started to appear. These journals and newspapers advocated the rejection of the existing literary canon, and its replacement with a new one that supported political and economic development as seen by the communists. This three-year transitional period, where we can still speak of a polyphony in literary life, ended with the communists winning the 1948 elections. This led to the complete sovietisation of literary life in Hungary.¹

The years 1945 to 1948 are also crucial for Márai's position in the Hungarian literary canon. After the war, the process of his gradual elimination from the

1 For a detailed analysis of the sovietisation of Hungarian literary criticism, see Scheibner 2014.

canon began. He could publish, but what he published did not fit into the cultural policy already initiated by the communists. The anti-Márai campaign was the process of his decanonisation. During these three years, his work and his views and attitudes were subjected to constant criticism in the communist press. The first sign foreshadowing the need to revise the entire canon of Hungarian literature and give it a new direction was Márton Horváth's article in May 1945. The final steps in this process in the case of Márai were György Lukács' 1948 article, and the nationalisation of the Révai publishing house, which published Márai's books.

On 31 May 1945, Horváth published an article entitled 'Babits halotti maszkja' (Babits' Death Mask) in *Szabad Nép* (Free People), the official journal of the Communist Party. The impetus for the article was an exhibition of abstract art in Budapest that Horváth visited and judged inappropriate for the new times. As he stated: 'This art has nothing to do with the present and nothing to do with the labour movement' (Horváth 1945: 5). This early article, which predates Lukács' cultural policy, was not a defined programme. Still, it was a signal that art was to be subordinate to socio-political demands. Horváth concluded the article with the following statement: 'Let's create, but let's do it in a way that makes young workers proud of their demanding lives and their bright futures' (Ibid.). Anyone who does not do this has no place among the artists of the future. The article is a harsh critique not only of abstract art, but also of artists (writers, musicians, etc) who continued the traditions of *Nyugat*, or simply who did not agree with the views of the Communist Party. They were all lumped together as *polgár* artists, who represented the values of the past and compromised Western Europe. Mihály Babits, a long-time editor of *Nyugat*, and the most important and influential writer in the interwar period, become a symbolic figure of the outdated, wrong art. All artists who wanted to follow his understanding of literature had no place in Hungarian literature. Horváth did not mention many authors by name, apart from Babits. One of the few, though, was Márai. 'Sándor Márai, the most self-conscious of the bourgeois [*polgári*] writers, is already speaking out. He promises to get out of the ivory tower and write the third volume of 'The Confessions'. He utters flawless sentences about the bridges that have fallen into the Danube and the dead of the Tunnel, about their eyes gazing into the sky. His words and sentences are as beautiful as the green and golden flies that feast on the dead' (Ibid.). Horváth referred to a short interview

Márai gave in May 1945 to the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* (The Hungarian Nation), and to a selection of poems Márai published in the newspaper that were thematically related to the siege of Budapest during the Second World War. As Gábor Reichert points out, these few sentences essentially summarise the central motifs of the anti-Márai press campaign of communist cultural policy between 1945 and 1948 (Reichert 2020: 106). First, Márai's aristocracy in attitude and views was emphasised. Second, his alleged disregard for people from the lower social classes was highlighted. Simultaneously, the term *polgár* gained a negative connotation. In the following months, another theme was added: Márai's refusal to be a part of socialist literature was criticised.

The rhetoric already set out in 1945 in Horváth's article did not change. Articles on Márai in the communist periodicals in the following months and years painted a negative picture of the writer, for whom there was no place in the new society. At the beginning, among the accusations, the most common concerned Márai's snobbishness. According to critics, Márai was a snobbish intellectual who did not care about the fate of the common people; he lived in an ivory tower, and was not interested in any other social class besides his own (Nagypál 1945; Goda 1946). The books Márai began to publish after the war were considered 'ostensibly impartial' (Nagypál 1945: 315), and falsely 'apolitical' (Goda 1946: 379); in fact, they were a propaganda product of the bourgeoisie (*polgári*) class (Ibid.) and an expression of 'bourgeois [*polgári*] decadence' (Szigeti 1947: 391). Márai's withdrawal from public life during the war and his silent opposition to Hungarian policy at the time were used against him. He was accused of being passive (Rónai 1947). With time, false arguments linking him with fascism began to appear. In order to fit in with the postwar public sentiment, the communists made up a narrative about Márai's support for fascism, which was not true. It was claimed he was a defender of the Horthy system (Pálóczi Horváth 1947). He was not only incapable of revising his past and responding positively to the situation of the new times, but he advocated against the people's democracy (Sós 1948). His books were 'reactionary', 'marked by intellectual emptiness' and 'damaging' (Keszti 1948, 10). He showed 'fascist tendencies' (N. Gy. 1948: 388) and 'depicted Hitlerism in a subtle style' (K. Gy. 1948). At the same time, the attacks on him proceeded on a more general level, namely as a representative of the class that the Communist Party wanted to devalue and degrade in the social discourse, and for which there was

no place in the new Hungarian society (Horváth 1947). However, communist critics began to question not only the social significance of the *polgár* social class in the past, but its very existence: it was only supposed to be the product of Márai's literary work (Nagypál 1947; Horváth 1948; Németh 1948). As Reichert points out, the attacks on Márai were both a direct criticism of the writer himself and served as an example and a warning to other artists and the entire system of literary institutions (Reichert 2020: 113).

The last three books Márai published in Hungary were three volumes of the novel *Sértődöttek*. The first volume, *Sértődöttek. A hang* (Offended People. The Voice), was published in 1947. In 1948, after three years of the anti-Márai campaign, he published *Sértődöttek. Jelvény és jelentés* (Offended People. Badge and Report), and *Sértődöttek. Művészet és szerelem* (Offended People. Art and Love). The third volume, despite being printed, was not released, and almost the entire print run was destroyed for political reasons. The novel depicts the fate of a *polgár* family in the years of Hitler's rise to power and the downfall of the world of European culture. All three volumes were unequivocally criticised in the communist press. Critics accused Márai of denying the revolutionary nature of the Soviet Union (Pálóczi-Horváth 1947), showing 'the true face of anti-people and anti-progressive fascism' (K. Gy. 1948). The seal of the whole anti-Márai campaign was a review of *Sértődöttek* by Lukács in the communist journal *Forum* in 1948. Lukács stated that he not only intended to deal with the first volume of *Sértődöttek*, but above all, he wanted to get to the truth regarding Márai's entire oeuvre (Lukács 1948: 127). A long critique, rooted in socialist ideology, applied and sharpened the elements previously used by communist critics. Lukács criticised Márai's views on the nature of the true revolution, the historical process, the essence of European culture, and Márai's aristocratic attitude, contempt for the working class, his extreme subjectivity in his view of historical events, and his alleged agreement with fascism. In addition, he criticised Márai's poetics, rooted in European modernism, and attributed falsehood and self-deception to his work. A few weeks later, at the end of March 1948, the Révai publishing house, which published Márai's books, was nationalised. The same year, at the beginning of September, Márai left Hungary.

The absent writer: the years of communism

Márai cannot be described as a completely forgotten writer during the communist era. During those 40 years, however, several generations have grown up who did not learn about his work in schools, did not see his books in bookshops, and did not hear his name on the radio or television. He remained known to a small group of critics and scholars, and to readers who were familiar with his work from the 1930s. The reason for this was not only his physical absence, but also the absence of new works published in exile. These works could not generate discussion among readers or scholars. His activity in emigration also contributed to the situation. Although he initially maintained contact with Hungarian émigrés, published in émigré journals, and worked for Radio Free Europe, over time he broke off all institutional contact. He did not join any Hungarian literary group or organisation in exile. He did not stop working, and although he could have changed the language of his work (in his youth he wrote in German, which he knew because of his Saxon ancestry), he continued to write in Hungarian. His books were published by small publishers and in small editions.

The image of Márai created between 1945 and 1948 has not been fully maintained in subsequent decades in Hungary, and although he continued to remain *persona non grata* for most of the communist period, the harsh criticism weakened over time and he was no longer directly targeted by the communist press. First, the accusations of holding fascist and Nazi views, and an alleged desire to return to the Horthy regime, were abandoned rather quickly. Later, the criticism relating to his class background was toned down. Márai's *polgár* was no longer a direct threat. However, the criticism of not being able to adapt to the socialist reality, as well as not seeing this reality as the right way forward for Hungarian society, remained valid. It is worth looking at some examples of the debate around Márai over these four decades.

In the early 1950s, his name was still alive in the public's memory, which is why he was still used by the communist press for propaganda purposes. One such occasion was the poem 'Halotti beszéd' (Funeral Oration) which Márai wrote in 1950 and 1951, and published in *Látóhatár* (Horizon), the Hungarian émigré literary journal. The poem's title refers to the first text written in the Hungarian language, and is a poignant record of an émigré's struggle to preserve his mother tongue. In 1954, the poem appeared legally in the Hungarian media. It was

first broadcast on 25 April on Kossuth Radio. A week later, on 1 May, it was printed in the weekly newspaper *Művelt Nép* (Educated People), together with a reply written by the writer Áron Tamási. The fact that an émigré's poem was published in the Hungarian press controlled by the state was used for propaganda purposes rather than a direct attack on Márai. The main point was to show that such a miserable, pessimistic vision of one's own homeland, and the tragic fate of the émigré, is shared only by those who leave Hungary. Tamási's answer accompanying the poem was intended to highlight this message, juxtaposing it with a positive image of a great future for the Hungarian nation and people. Tamási reminded Márai that one should not leave the homeland, but instead should stay and work hard for its bright future.

Márai's image in communist-era publications synthesising modern Hungarian literature also changed with time. In 1965, *Magyar irodalmi lexikon* (Hungarian Literary Lexicon) analysed Márai's work rather negatively, and placed it in the context of his social views. Gusztáv Makay wrote the entry on Márai. In retrospect, some of Makay's statements should be considered balanced, as they showed Márai's work without much ideological baggage. For example, 'The so-called essay style in Hungarian literature in the 20th century was brought to perfection by [Márai], and it was also his influence that made it dominant in Hungarian bourgeois [*polgár*] prose' (M.G. [Makay] 1965: 184). Márai's novels from the 1940s, including the novel *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (*Embers*), which was the first to gain international success in the late 1990s, did not receive Makay's recognition. Márai's works from this period, according to Makay, took his literary style to the point of mannerism. Although Márai was no longer portrayed as an ally of fascism, his rejection of fascist ideology was for the wrong reasons. According to Makay, Márai was looking to the past with nostalgia, and was not interested in the future. Makay blamed Márai for his criticism of the development of socialism, and for failing to recognise a crucial moment in the evolution of history.

A different approach to Márai's work is evident in a synthesis of Hungarian literature published just a year later in 1966. In *A magyar irodalom története* (The History of Hungarian Literature), Márai was portrayed in a completely negative way, giving essentially no credit to his work other than the fact that he was an extremely popular writer before the war. And even that fact was diminished by stating that Márai's popularity was temporary, and did not last long. László

B. Nagy wrote the short essay on Márai. Nagy took up the theme of Márai's criticising fascism for the wrong reasons: 'He criticises rising fascism from a purely conservative standpoint and in a purely enigmatic way' (B. Nagy 1966: 718). Nagy also denied the existence of the *polgár* and its role in Hungarian society and culture. According to Nagy, the *polgár* was a figment of Márai's imagination, the result of 'lying illusionism', and Márai 'builds himself a world of make-believe' (Ibid.: 719). Nagy also criticised Márai's poetics, did not consider any of his work to be good, and described him as a 'poor student of second-rate German writers' (Ibid.: 720). The article also briefly discussed works that Márai published in emigration: these works were written with a desire to draw attention, to show his 'increasing uncertainty and confusion'. Nagy considered Márai's interest in the philosophy of culture as superficial and as a private interest, because in fact, according to Nagy, Márai was not interested in the social situation of all of society, only in his own position. Finally, Márai was portrayed as an enemy of the people's democracy who relentlessly attacked his homeland.

László Ferenczi's article in 1979 was an exception. It was published in a volume on interwar Hungarian prose. Ferenczi focused in his essay on the novel *Egy polgár vallomásai*, but he considered it in the broader context of Márai's oeuvre, taking into account, however, only works published by Márai before 1948. The article lacked Marxist rhetoric, and there were no accusations of favouring fascism or denying the existence of the *polgár* class, nor of the harmfulness of this social class, or of Márai himself. A short introduction explained why the essay on Márai appeared in the volume. Ferenczi explicitly stated that Márai's views had not changed since his emigration, and he remained critical of socialist Hungary. However, according to Ferenczi, it was unthinkable to study the literature of the interwar period without including Márai's work, as he was one of the most respected and most widely read authors (Ferenczi 1979: 321). This short introduction shows that Márai began to be understood in a historical perspective, and his work could return to the history of Hungarian literature.

In the 1980s, the communist regime began to embrace émigré artists. In 1982, another synthesis of Hungarian literature was published. *A magyar irodalom története 1945–1975* (A History of Hungarian Literature: 1945–1975) was, in a sense, a continuation of the 1966 history of Hungarian literature, but this time exclusively after the *liberation* (*felszabadulás*), as communist rhetoric referred to the entry of Soviet troops into Hungary in 1945. Volume four was

devoted to Hungarian literature outside Hungary.² Although the section dealing with Márai was not as critical as the 1966 study, the rhetoric of communist criticism was still evident. The authors even cited Lukács' authority in judging Márai's work. Márai continued to be seen through the lens of his political views. According to the authors, Márai was 'unable to integrate into the emerging new social order' and remained a supporter of 'European humanism' (Béládi et al. 1982: 378). When discussing work from the 1940s, a more critical view becomes apparent, whereas when discussing work published in emigration, the focus was on a brief presentation of the subject matter. Interestingly, one of the authors of this essay is László Rónay, later the author of several monographs on Márai.

Márai's absence over time made him a distant figure, who began to take on a historical dimension, even though he continued writing and publishing. He was no longer a part of living literature. His name appeared infrequently in the press, mainly in the memoirs of other writers as one of the leading prewar publicists and writers. Occasionally, reviews of his new books were published. The 1980s brought changes in the Communist Party. It wanted to show a softer face, and respond to growing discontent in society by inviting and rehabilitating many exiled artists. One of them was Márai. However, he did not accept the invitation. Whether this was an unbending will, or perhaps the simple fact that he was already an ailing old man unable to travel from the United States to Europe, is difficult to decide. He allowed his books to be published in Hungary only after free democratic elections had been held and Soviet troops had left Hungary. A mythical image as a writer resisting communist oppression until the end of his days has emerged.

Back to the canon in the 1990s

Márai died on 21 February 1989. He committed suicide at the age of 89. His person was mythologised and functioned in the social discourse partly in isolation from his works, which were forgotten (works published in Hungary before 1948) or unknown (works published in exile). By the end of the 1980s, discussions of his work had

2 Hungary lost some of its historic territories to neighbouring states as a result of the Treaty of Trianon after the First World War. The significant Hungarian minority in those countries are described as Hungarians outside the borders of Hungary (*határon túli magyarok*). The volume under discussion was devoted to their literary production.

started to change. His renewed reception in the 1990s and his image as a writer and citizen were strongly linked to the socio-political situation. Simultaneously, the term *polgár* was revived, but with a semantic shift. As I showed in previous sections, in the 1930s and 1940s the term was used to denote literature engaged in a discourse on the different social classes. After the Second World War, the term gained a negative meaning, and the *polgár* was seen as a reactionary element and an enemy of the people's democracy, with no place in Hungarian society. During the years of transformation, when communist propaganda newspeak with expressions such as *comrade* was rejected, the term *polgár* was reintroduced. It was intended to help build the foundation of civil democracy and rebuild social relations on the basis of respect for civil rights. The term began to mean approximately a citizen of democratic Hungary. However, the change needed a face and a name that could function as a symbol to facilitate the integration of society. As Tóth points out, 'critics, journalists, politicians and literary scholars *together* create the image of the author in accordance with the socio-cultural-political demands of the change of regime: the goal was to create a self-conscious, free citizen from the subject of the Kádár regime' (Tóth 2019: 23). Márai not only returned to the canon, but also became a part of the civic discourse during the years of political transformation. He became a model for political socialisation. This had several consequences for the nature of his reception from this period and determined the interpretation and public use of his works in the following years. The social entanglement of his works from the 1930s and 1940s was forgotten, and Márai started to function as a unifying symbol for the whole nation (Tóth 2019: 22). In this process, which had a mythologising character, his biography started to play an important role. The author's image was in fact elevated above his literary production. He gained the status of a cult writer. However, this canon-forming cliché of the *polgár* writer proved to be a trap that is still difficult to escape.

According to Tóth, three directions of interest in Márai's criticism can be identified in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Tóth 2019: 24–25). The first direction somehow restored the interwar image of Márai, and placed his work in the social and literary context of the 1930s and 1940s. Among the researchers following this approach were János Szávai (1988) and Péter Sz. Nagy (1989). The second direction of research aimed to reconstruct Marái's world-view; for example, Rónay's monograph in 1990 (Rónay 1990). The third direction of interest, represented by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák (1988a; 1988b; 1991), focused

on aesthetic values, and emphasised the specific dichotomy of Márai's work. On one hand, a certain part of Márai's work, namely his autobiographical writings, were included in the Hungarian literary canon. On the other hand, however, many novels from the interwar period were considered part of popular literature, and were rejected by Hungarian scholars as middle-brow. Surprisingly, these less appreciated novels have proven to be a great publishing success abroad, and in the late 1990s introduced Márai's reception worldwide.

After the fall of communism, Márai's work, hitherto absent in Hungary, made a huge comeback. In 1989, his membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was reinstated posthumously. His books were published one after another, several titles a year. In 1990, *Egy polgár vallomásai* was the first book to be republished. Between 1990 and 1995, 35 titles were published (Mészáros 2003: 108–121). His books filled bookshops and libraries, and the intensity of publishing new titles led to excess. As one journalist pointed out on the release of Márai's collection of reports from his 1927 trip to the Middle East, each new Márai book was no longer a literary festival, but an everyday event, and Márai was present in Hungarian literary life as if he had never left the country (Lócsei 1995: 10). Márai was celebrated on television and radio; his dramas were staged in theatres; commemorative plaques were unveiled in Košice and Budapest; academic conferences and literary evenings were held for literary scholars, literary critics and the general public; a prize named after him was established (Márai Sándor-díj); a society named after him was created (Márai Sándor Alapítvány), etc. His works began to be translated, and international success came in the late 1990s. In April 1998, the novel *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* was published in Italy (*Le braci*, in English *Embers*). Numerous positive reviews sparked readers' interest. The novel was reprinted ten times in 1998 alone. By 2002, there were 29 reprints, with a total print run of 250,000 copies (Mészáros 2003: 473–474). The next year, in 1999, *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* was published in German. In the same year, Hungary was guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, and Márai proved to be one of the most popular authors. These two events launched his international career, which continues to this day.

International success has coincided with the changing nature of Márai's reception in Hungary. As in other countries in the region, the discussion of the national identity developed quickly after 1989. In the political sphere, competing political parties have emerged. The image of Márai as a *polgár* writer that was

created between 1989 and 1991 was maintained in the following years. But the direct function of this image (to unify the nation) was no longer valid, due to the changing nature of the political debate in Hungary in the 1990s and at the turn of the century. The differing views on the nation's identity were reflected in the political discussion that continues to this day. Who is a Hungarian citizen? What is the identity of the nation? The response of the right of the political spectrum was (is) significantly different from that of the left of the political spectrum. But both sides used Márai's authority, as the first Hungarian writer to achieve such incredible international success, to validate their views. Márai's interest in socio-political issues was reflected in many of his works. At the same time, his style, often aphoristic, made him an accessible and popular source of quotations for every occasion. He became an oracle (Révész 2008), and his authority confirms the rightness of whoever quotes him. Gusztáv Megyesi aptly described the situation: 'I don't know since when, but I have had enough of Márai: when I see his name in a newspaper or hear it on a show, my perception automatically switches off, and I have a feeling that by constantly quoting him he will be hated, he will be destroyed' (Megyesi 2006: 14).

The discussion on Márai from the early 1990s overlooked broader and more general cultural, philosophical and anthropological dimensions of his work. This aspect of research started to emerge only parallel to the international success of his works. He has become part not only of the popular canon, but also of the academic canon, and Márai criticism has proven to be a very vibrant field of research. The rediscovery of his oeuvre has quickly resulted in increased interest among literary scholars. Already at the beginning of the 1990s some monographs devoted to his oeuvre started being published. Among the researchers of his work are the authors of several monographs, István Fried, Rónay, Huba Lőrinczy and Szávai. Since the beginning of the 21st century, monographs focusing on selected elements of his writing began to be published. In addition, several collective monographs and a multitude of articles were published. These works presented a wide variety of topics, and explored selected pieces of Márai's oeuvre from many different thematic and methodological perspectives.

From today's perspective (2023), there is an obvious need to raise again some questions about Márai's poetics and reread his oeuvre, this time without the burden of current political and social requirements. Csilla Tóth's monograph (2019) should be regarded as a landmark work in this respect. As the recent

Márai conference (in 2019 in Budapest) demonstrated, this need is as vital as ever (Fried 2020; Kulcsár Szabó 2020; Szávai 2020).

Conclusions

This paper indicated the social, political and historical conditions affecting different interpretations of Márai's work. His place in the canon of Hungarian literature at all stages of his career was related to political transformations and changes in the understanding of the social role of the *polgár* class. He entered Hungarian literature during a period of intense discussions on social development in Hungary. He became a representative of the *polgár* class, and his books contributed to the inclusion of the *polgár* class in the notion of the middle class that narrowed after the First World War. Márai managed to receive critical acclaim and build a wide readership. The three-year period after the Second World War was marked by attacks from the Communist Party, which aimed to create a negative image of him as a member of a harmful social group. As a result, he was stripped of his place in the literary canon. Only the post-communist revision of the literary canon enabled his return. This return, however, was burdened with the needs of the era of political transformation. His image was mythologised and used for socio-political purposes also in the following years and at the beginning of the 21st century.

Viewed from today's perspective, Márai's reception in Hungary after 1989 has been encumbered by socio-historical, political and biographical readings of his work. In the debate over the national canon, the biography of an artist always plays a significant role, due to the value patterns promoted. The artist's world-view is hard to separate from the evaluation of literary work. In Márai's case, the social and political discourse used Márai's image created in the early 1990s. The absence of his work in Hungary for more than 40 years resulted in a fragmented reading of his oeuvre and in trying to catch up quickly and find an explanation for his international success. It can also be said that the academic discussion since the second half of the 1990s has proceeded independently of social and political interest in Márai's work. He has regained his place in the literary canon, but the character of his place, his exact role in the canon, is still a question to be answered.

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