

In Search of Lost Cultures: Sándor Márai, a Central European Post-War Traveller in the East

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The change of the Western travel culture in the 1920s and 1930s was influenced by the experiences of the First World War and the succeeding political, social and economic shocks. Sándor Márai (1900-1989) was one of the most important representatives of the post-war generation of Hungarian writers. He travelled to the Middle-East and to both Western and Central Europe, and captured his experiences of foreign lands in his works. *In Search of Gods* was Márai's first travel account (published when he was aged 27), which summarized his memories about a journey across the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East. In Márai's travelogue, the disillusion of the post-war generation merges with the ironic and sceptical attitude and sensitivity of a Central European traveller. The main focus of my study is the way in which Márai reshapes the relativism of the Spenglerian anti-humanistic theory of crisis as a means of intercultural mediation and understanding of each other. The basis of his philosophy was the refusal of the hegemony of the Western "Faustian" culture, the turn towards foreign cultures and the effort to understand them, setting by this a good example for literates of today's crisis.

Keywords: post-war generation; Central Europe; Orientalism; criseology; cultural criticism.

Post-War Crisis and Travelling Culture in Europe

The change of the Western travel culture in the 1920s and 1930s was deeply influenced by the experiences of the First World War (1914-18) and the succeeding political, social and economic shocks.

The members of the generation which was brought up during the Great War time and the succeeding anxious years in Europe had different outlooks and values from their parents, perceiving a drastically changed World surrounding them. George Orwell, member of the post-war generation recalls a rather deep cleavage between different age-groups of the British society in his book, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937):

By 1918 everyone under forty was in a bad temper with his elders, and the mood of anti-militarism which followed naturally upon the fighting was extended into a general revolt against orthodoxy and authority. (...) The dominance of "old men" was held to be responsible for every evil known to humanity, and every accepted institution from Scott's novels to the House of Lords was derided merely because "old men" were in favour of it. (...) At that time we all thought of ourselves as enlightened creatures of a new age, casting off the orthodoxy that had been forced upon us by those detested "old men". (Orwell, 1983: 241)

The attitude of the new generation was almost the same in all the European societies which have experienced the shock of the war, although the emotional revolt, which has been rather pre-

cisely described by the British author, had deeper socio-cultural concerns in taste and political values of the young. The viewpoint of Orwell's contemporaries may be characterized by the sharp refusal of the values of the 19th century: optimism about technical and social improvement, romantic-patriotic ideas and pathetic rhetoric, while their outlooks were influenced by such new intellectual experiences like the relativist cultural philosophy of Oswald Spengler or T. S. Eliot's vision of *The Waste Land*. The ironic, caricaturistic reshaping of an anxious, chaotic World plays a key-role in the works of the young authors of the 1920s – among others Jean Cocteau, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell – as opposed to the tragic pathos and sentimentalism of the Victorian Age. “The tradition of romantic pastoralism died, one might say, on the Western front”, as the bon mot of these years is cited by Samuel Hynes (1977: 24).

The views of the young authors were considerably influenced by the new myth of travelling. Contrary to their elders, travelling meant not simply humanist study tours for them, but it became a lifestyle and an important way of self-examination and social analysis, providing experiences of transition in time, space and culture. “From 1928 until 1937 I had no fixed home and no possessions which would not conveniently go on a porter's barrow. I travelled continuously, in England and abroad”, as it was written by Evelyn Waugh, remembering the wanderer years of his youth (Waugh, 1959: 7). “These were the years”, as he writes, “when Mr Peter Fleming went to the Gobi Desert, Mr Graham Greene to the Liberian hinterland; Robert Byron (...) to the ruins of Persia. We turned our backs on civilization” (1959: 8). The motivation of this attitude was the disillusion and longing to leave the ruined and narrow Europe, filled with the wish for regeneration and intellectual resource in the land of ancient cultures. According to Samuel Hynes, travelling played a significant role as “the basic trope of the generation” both in poetry and prose (1977: 229). It might be not by chance that the travelogue became one of the most popular genres among them. Such books have appeared in the second part of the 1920s: *Labels* (1930) and *Remote People* (1931) by Waugh or *Journey without Maps* (1936) by Graham Greene, showing an often absurd, chaotic and inscrutable vision of the World.

The First World War had, if it might be possible, more tragic consequences for the societies of Central Europe than for other societies from elsewhere, with the gunshots in Sarajevo 1914 that signed the beginning of a long series of tragedies taking place in the region during the 20th century. The defeat of the Austro-Hungarian “K. und K.” army was followed by the dissolution of the Empire in 1918, and the succeeding years of one-time subjects of the Habsburgs were framed by changing borders and regimes and continuous political uncertainty. “My generation just began life in the middle of some kind of a terrible novel from Karl May; the golden sun of childhood set off, planes and lighting rockets appeared in the sky, instead of bats. Members of the class were taken from the school desks to the war. (...) My generation has never felt the latent certainty, which filled the soul of our fathers”, wrote the Hungarian author Sándor Márai (1900-1989), remembering his youth (2000: 38-40, our tr.).

The remembrance of the early traumas played a huge influence on the thinking of many young Hungarian writers between the wars, arousing their interest in the cultural and philosophical theories of crisis. One of the most important was Sándor Márai, who was born as the eldest son of a middle-class family in a multiethnic city of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Kassa (today Košice in Slovakia), which had native German, Hungarian and Slovakian population and citizen traditions. The place of his birth and childhood, existing as an interactive cultural space this time, played a decisive influence on Márai's way of thinking throughout his life: “we have built the cathedral, for centuries, the native inhabitants of Kassa, Hungarians, Germans and Slovaks” – as he writes, referring to the cathedral of the city as the symbol of multiethnic citizen life and values (35, our tr.). These centres, like Košice/Kaschau/Kassa “have functioned at times as ‘liminal cities’ and ‘magnetic fields’ that interface Eastern and Western cultural paradigms in a continuous though not necessarily equal dialogue (the Eastern or ‘oriental’ input functioning often as the tolerated other)” – as it was written by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (2002: 27). This is the reason why “such cities encourage a de/reconstruction of national narratives, a hy-

bridization of styles and genres, and alternative social and ethnic relations” (26).

Márai, similarly to the main character of his novel *Válás Budán* [Divorce in Buda] (1935), regarded himself as someone who was born in a “painfully broken moment”, taking part as a child in the middle-class idyll of the last peacetime years, but his childhood was already pervaded by the permanent mood of “something is wrong” (Márai: 2000, 39, our tr.). Later, the adult Márai became aware of the contradictions and surviving legacy of his class and spatial region, especially due to the works of Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Joseph Roth. After the dissolution of the Monarchy, Márai left Kassa, which became part of the newly founded Czechoslovakia, although it always remained “The City” for him, representing the symbiosis of Central European ethnic groups and citizen values.

In the free atmosphere and economic consolidation of the 1920s, parallel to their Western contemporaries, several young Hungarian authors and intellectuals started out to get to know Europe and the great World. Sándor Márai was one of the most important representatives of “The Generation of the Wanderer Years”, as it was called by one of its members, the novelist and literature historian Antal Szerb (1901-1945) (2002: 499). Between 1919 and 1928 Márai lived in Germany and France, being a student and journalist, and travelled almost continuously inside and outside Europe. The analysis of crisis represents one of the strongest voices in his publicistic works, novels, journals and travelogues. Above all, the cultural relativism of Oswald Spengler and the social and cultural criticism of José Ortega y Gasset and Julien Benda played a huge impact on Márai’s point of view in those years. He travelled to the Middle East, but also to Western and Central Europe between the 1920s and 1940s, and captured his travel experiences in his works *Istenek nyomában* [In Search of Gods] (1927), *Napnyugati őrzár* [Patrol in the West] (1936), *Kassai őrzár* [Patrol in Kassa] (1941), and *Európa elrablása* [The Kidnapping of Europe] (1947). During his journeys, his Central European roots played all the time a determining and indelible influence on his view of the World.

“The eye-witness of the last insane decade”

In Search of Gods was Márai’s first travel book, published at the age of 27, which summarized his memories about a journey across Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Greece. This was his first book, which was accepted later as part of his oeuvre and was written especially for the Hungarian public, before his repatriation to Hungary, in 1928. “Such a route has never been taken by a Hungarian journalist, this is the reason why I may believe that the book would not be without any success”, as he wrote to his elder fellow-writer, Jenő Heltai before starting out (Rónay, 1990: 52, our tr.).

Although the young Márai was “inspired to start by the sense of crisis”, as it was written by Huba Lőrinczy (1997: 269, our tr.), the narrator of the book dissolves his own sense in the common feeling, giving voice to the frustration of the post-war generation. He declares by the boarding at Marseille, that:

this protest is not personal, somehow not I am who is offended, but the eye-witness of the last insane decade, who has climbed up yet to the ship, but does not say farewell to Europe, does not wave hands nor wait for anything, and is not angry with anyone, feeling for a while, that he goes home to Asia and detaches himself from Europe, where, ultimately, he was cheated, deceived, robbed and abused. (Márai, 2011: 15-16)

The Cap Polonio, one-time German ship of immigrants (currently owned by the French, with an Alsatian waiter on board, who has changed his nationality after the war, together with the ship), became itself “like a piece of Alsace” (17, our tr.), the symbol of the post-traumatic loss of identity. The events of the preceding years are revealed only indirectly in Márai’s work, through hints at traumatic motifs of social remembrance or unexpected comparisons: “These

strange, difficult years” (11, our tr.), as we read in the monologue of the narrator. Later, in Bethlehem, he meditates on recent martyrs of the social ideas, without mentioning their names:

He died for the humankind... it is a strange word, having a hard taste. Names come to my mind, as I am standing here, names of people who have recently died for the humankind. They were born somewhere in a hole, their fathers were carpenters or something similar, and their mothers were poor women. They were sitting in cafés as exiles, preaching through papers and brochures, and they were crucified at the age of thirty or forty. They were beaten to death. They were struck dead. For the humankind. (Márai, 2011: 130, our tr.)

But the perspective of the “child of the century” is more significant than any words could be, because it is influenced by the memories of historic events. He is confronting his experiences of the personally perceived, but strange East, with his own traumatic European identity, all the time during his journey. His point of view is essentially determined by irony and political realism based on the experiences of recent times, and sceptical attitude about ideologies. “Who are ‘we?’”: asking himself the question, listening to the tempered argumentation of the referent of the French Foreign Ministry in plural, about the “pacification” of Syria. Later he finds an occasion to dismiss every kind of ideological dogmatism, when he watches the closed life of the Samaritans in Palestine, whose belief in their hereditary chosenness is compared by the narrator to the modern racist theories. Meanwhile, the notorious cruelty of the “barbarian” tribe of Syrian Druses seems to be out of date in the eyes of a European, because they attack their enemies with short swords instead of tanks, planes or chemical weapons. Even though, Márai is not a nihilist traveller: he admires those, who are directed from their own ideas, like the archaeologist Carter, who researches the tombs of Pharaohs in Egypt, “giving the whole energy and passion, knowledge, experience and enthusiasm” (Márai, 2011: 43, our tr.) to achieve his aim, without any respect for the people’s opinion about him. Or like the Jewish farmers, who are founding their home with hard work in the desert of Palestine. He has respect just for life itself, for “great passion”, and for the fundamental rights and dignity, as the “last necessity” of the human being (102-103).

This is the horizon on which Márai rethinks the old Western “pilgrimage to the Orient” topic, the dreamed-of Oriental world being the object of his escapism. From the Goethe’s *West-Eastern Divan* (1814-15), several European poets and prose writers (among others Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Nerval, Flaubert) expressed their admiration for the imagined Orient, looking for regeneration and intellectual resources outside the Western civilization. Márai’s travelogue, through its genre, theme and points of view, is connecting with this very rich European tradition which has a serious influence on what and how he writes. “I believe” as Edward Said points out “no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism” (1977: 3). “Every writer on the Orient (...) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself” (20). The discourse of Western Orientalism reshapes the real elements of the Eastern world according to the expectations, wishes and interests of the Western people. Said argues that “the Orient” was not a simple geographical reality for European – especially for the British and French – authors, adventurers and travellers, but rather a scene which was suitable for their dreams and intellectual expectations. Flaubert was “seeking a ‘homeland’, as Jean Bruneau has called it, in the locales of the origin of religions, visions, and classical antiquity” during his Oriental journey, while Nerval was “seeking – or rather following – the traces of his personal sentiments and dreams, like Sterne’s Yorick before him” (180). Following this tradition, the “Oriental journey” topic appears in Márai’s works as the rediscovery of a dream which has already been dreamed, filling the traveller with an unquenchable thirst: “Show yourself, you mysterious! Let me get closer to you, you calm, you rich, you dirty! Give just a gulp

of that drug, from which the eyes of people are shining here with such a restful light!” (Márai, 2011: 144, our tr.). The Orient is the magic world of the Arabian Nights, where the border between dreams and reality is fading in the moonlight or in the flaming sunshine: “I am in an old tale, which has been told for thousands of years; at dawn, it has never been finished, every night it started again and it has not been ended up to now” (61–62, our tr.).

The efforts of the narrator to reconcile the experienced things with the preceding mythological and fictional narratives about the Orient are very typical. Although his expectations often fail, he takes ironic notes. The first person whom he sees in Alexandria upon his arrival is “Aladdin standing at the doorstep of Africa, being black in a white veil and red tarbush, holding a huge lamp in his hand, the lamp, which illuminates the wonders of the Arabian Nights” (24, our tr.). Later he finds out that ‘Aladdin’, who steals into the landing ship with his mates, offers for sale a night-table lamp which has been stolen from a hotel. Besides, the roaring Arabian “porters” assaulting the ship remind the narrator of Ali Baba and the Forty Robbers. On the first night of Bajram, the succeeding month of the Mohammedan fast, the magic of Babylon is revived in the streets of Cairo. The magic can often be caught in the scenes of the Oriental landscape: “The car takes me to the citadel at night; some hundreds minarets are in the moonlight, shining domes of mosques, tousled palm oases nodding in the wind, some thousands of houses with flat roofs and a crossing thick silver stream, the Nile” (59, our tr.). Later in Istanbul: “To face the Bosphorus spilled with the golden moon in the night, Istanbul with its monumental churches, the Hagia Sophia (...): a city cannot be more beautiful. We simply should not get close to it” (197, our tr.).

However, the myth of the Orient has a further meaning for the disillusioned Hungarian traveller, referring to the Eastern origin of his nation. Travelling to the East appears in Márai’s travelogue as a chance of return to the roots, after the failed trial of Western modernization: “to mingle in this infinite crowd of Asia with a tarbush on your head, and not to write to anybody, forget about everything, about war and literature, about the capital and the telephone, and go home under the palms and dream longer with these hundreds of millions the great dream of the Orient – the dream about the native land where once I came from” (16, our tr.). But searching for the alternative is based on the stereotype of the “Orient” as opposite to the West, in the sense given by the Europeans, as it may be seen in Goethe’s *Hejira* from his *West-Eastern Divan*: “North and West and South up-breaking! / Thrones are shattering, Empires quaking; / Fly thou to the untroubled East, / There the patriarchs’ air to taste! / What with love and wine and song / Chiser’s fount will make thee young” (Goethe, 1914: 1). That way the Hungarian traveller’s picture of the East mirrors the crisis of the West, following an old European tradition instead of “arriving home” in the Orient. Also “the eye-witness of the maddened last decade” himself is aware of being unable to leave his traumatised European identity:

one can’t run away from people, after all travelling and distance, I can’t run away from my passing life either; each of my concerns is coming with me; they are in my pocket, in my luggage: a letter, a promise, a misbelief, a conviction – to travel to the East away from all of these, to leave Europe to see camels, palms and nice and wise Arabians are all in vain, like to go to see the footsteps of old gods, too. (Márai, 2011: 10, our tr.)

This belief is strengthened by his meeting with the Arabian dragoman Ahmed Rumi in Luxor, who calls him in his native Hungarian language: “I have purchased my clothes in Paris, my hat in London, my shoes in Vienna, all in vain; even a blind man could see that I am Hungarian. And I might have lived in Western cities for so long, but the first ragged Arabian in one of Luxor’s dark streets can pick me up: I am Hungarian” (48 our tr.).

“Orientalism has been subjected to imperialism, positivism, utopianism, historicism, Darwinism, racism, Freudianism, Marxism, Spenglerism”, as it was written by Said (1977: 43). The cultural theory of Spengler, representing the renewed discourse of Western Orientalism in the 1920s,

had a remarkable impact on Márai's view of the Orient. The narrator's selection and interpretation of the scenes are deeply influenced by the morphological view of *The Decline of the West* (I. 1918, II. 1922). Márai met during his journey no less than three of the eight great cultures listed in Spengler's work: the Egyptian, the Ancient and the Arabian. The symbolic representation of the Oriental landscape, relics and peoples shows the aesthetic perception of cultures, for example in the description of the ancient treasures of a past aristocracy in the museum of Cairo, or in the frescos which were brought to light in Pompeii. The narrator finds and shows these relics and artefacts as symbolic objects, which are able to express the spirit of lost cultures. But the "praying people" as an everyday spectacle of the Arabian way of life may also be such a symbol, whose conflict with the "rushing people" of the West seems hardly avoidable, according to the narrator's view (Márai, 2011: 79-81). Spengler argues that the same phases of development are repeated in different cultures: "Does world-history present to the seeing eye certain grand traits, again and again, with sufficient constancy to justify certain conclusions?" – asks the German philosopher in his well-known work (Spengler, 1991: 3). The ruins of Pompeii recall the Spenglerian idea of homology: "You can find ornamental decoration with Fortuna and baskets of flowers in Pompeii, where somehow everything reminds me of the end of the 18th century (...) everything repeats itself and comes back in times, maybe the lava too" (Márai, 2011: 210, our tr.).

In Search of Gods was regarded by many critics as one of the first Spenglerian works in the Hungarian literature, although it is very important to emphasize that the ironic-sceptic outlook of the young Márai – which can be summarized in his words about the closed life of the Samaritans: "It's not worth dying for the letter, Samaritan, because the truth is relative and even if there is any kind of truth, there is only one: you have to live, until and how you can" (127, our tr.) – cannot endure any ideological limits. The Hungarian author, who rejects any kind of authority, similarly to his Western contemporaries, refers ironically to the theory of crisis, when he starts off with Goethe's *Faust* in his pocket, as the son of "the declining West". The only close reference to Spengler may reveal a lot about the author's ironic attitude, comparing lonely camels standing by the Nile at sunset to the German cultural ideologist who augurs "The Decline of the West" (76, our tr.). Márai's attitude continually remains rather autonomous from the Spenglerian theory – and it may not be otherwise, given the German theorist's opinion, who argues that Western culture has been exhausted, and encourages members of the new generation to deal with politics and science topics instead of arts and literature. This case, a literary Spenglerism, may be just an ironic one. We may get closer if we regard Márai's Spenglerism as part of his way of thinking, which was called "iterative", instead of a stabile outlook of the world, by the literary historian János Szávai (2008: 7-19).

Despite his irony and changing viewpoints, there is an aspect in which Márai constantly agrees with the German philosopher. This aspect refers to the historic relativist view of the social phenomenon, which is essentially more consistently asserted by Márai than by Spengler himself. For example, while Spengler regards colonialism and militarism as necessary elements of civilization, representing – despite his declared historic scepticism – the timely discourse of the Western Orientalism of his age, Márai appeals to cultural relativism in order to question the Western-centred viewpoints of the colonizing powers: "it is not possible, after all, to grasp and to understand, what we, Europeans are doing in the World! What is the Legion looking for here?" (Márai, 2011: 167, our tr.) – he exclaims, regarding the military presence of the French Foreign Legion in Syria. The traveller's experiences are not able to confirm the European view of Orientalism. Arriving at Alexandria, he discovers that such words as "East" and "West" convey rather to qualities which mirror or interpenetrate each other, instead of labels for changeable identities: "everything is false or falsified, what is still pure Oriental is chewed by a spiritless civilisation, and what is European is defiled by the East" (29-30, our tr.). For him, the European narrative of the Orient appears as a dream which has been dissolved by the emerging political self-consciousness of the Arabian peasants: "The Orient is a great dream and those who have dreamed it have been woken up. But not entirely so... surely, not around Aswan. But this is the first time in one thousand years,

when the Arabian peasant looks around his own cottage as if he really sees something, and what he sees he does not like” (54, our tr.). As Márai distinguishes the social reality from the homogenizing discourse of Orientalism, the East appears to him as a carrier of time experience, which is fundamentally different from the Western one. History, as a Western narrative, cannot be applied to the life of the Eastern society, so the history of colonization – as the Western presence in the East – can only be reported. However, the motionless Arab society has no history of its own:

The Fellah, at his work, still looks after the conquerors running across with the lightning train, as he did five thousand years before, in the time of the first pharaoh Menes – he looks today, in the time of Fuad I, as he used to, at the conquerors streaming the Nile Basin, the Hyksos, the Ethiopians, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, Arabs, Turks and Englishmen. They all came here, they robbed, infected blood and killed, they came by the lightning train, in the sleeping-car, like the Britons, or riding elephants, like the Persians – and in the end, they all marched out, and there remained only the Fellah, the Nile, the earth, life and misery. (32-33, our tr.)

The different experience of time is a source of overwhelming strangeness for the European traveller, forcing him to rethink his essential notions, such as life, freedom, work, justice, happiness and morality: “Cairo is the first city in the Orient where much baggage has to be thrown away; you have brought it from Europe, but here you can no longer make use of it with entire Western expertise” (63, our tr.). This is why it is not possible to imagine a simple and seamless fusion between the two worlds such as that symbolized, in Kemal Pasha’s Turkey, by the wearing of the hat by the young Turks and the prohibition of the traditional Turkish tarbush. All people are bound by their tradition, but that is why the dialogue between representatives of different cultures is unavoidable.

From the Periphery of the West to the Centre of the East

“We were a generation brought up on adventure stories who had missed the enormous disillusionment of the First War; so we went looking for adventure”, as it was written by Graham Greene in the Preface to his travelogue *Journey without Maps* (1936) (1978: ix). In the first travel book of his Hungarian contemporary Sándor Márai, the disillusion of the post-war generation merges with the ironic, sceptical attitude and sensitivity of a Central European traveller.

Márai believes that there is no other way to freedom and self-expression than the struggle of creation: “You have to sit down somewhere and express yourself completely: through a book, through a duty which you accept, through an act, and I recently realized that life is what so complicated: even through a crime if you have such a terrible fate” (Márai, 2011: 211, our tr.). The spontaneous experience of freedom is only given to the native people living outside of civilization, where “there is no telephone and no railway, no authority and no occupation, there is only life here, the cruel and indifferent order of nature” (52-53). The narrator considers that freedom nostalgically, but he knows that such an experience is not available to Western people, because there is no return to the pre-modern state. However, contrary to the British and French authors, we may see that the Hungarian Márai is travelling to the Eastern alien world whilst having an ambivalent relationship to the “West” itself. The rejection of the colonialist discourses and greater susceptibility to alternative forms of identity may be partly due to this, because his native Central European experiences about cultural heterogeneity help him to understand several phenomena he perceives, especially at the meeting points of Eastern and Western cultures. The “Central European attitude” – as labelled by Czesław Miłosz – is marked by irony, scepticism about the “great narratives”, and the sense of cultural heterogeneity and the marginal – ethnic, religious and cultural – identities. “The ways of feeling and thinking of its inhabitants must thus suffice for drawing mental lines which seem to be more durable than the borders of the states” (Miłosz, 1986: 101).

The native experience of ethnic and cultural pluralism encourages the traveller to give up the West-centric view. Márai deals with the Orientalism and Spenglerism topics and approaches them with irony. He chooses as a basis of his philosophy the refusal of the Western “Faustian” culture hegemony, the turn towards foreign cultures and the effort to understand them.

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