

Individual, Society, and System

Philosophy of History in Sándor Márai's Late Fiction

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Abstract. This paper examines Sándor Márai's (1900–1989) views on the nature of historical processes, focusing on his late fiction, i.e., novels published in exile. Three novels are selected for the analysis: *San Gennaro vére* (1965, *The Blood of San Gennaro*), *Ítélet Canudosban* (1970, *Judgment at Canudos*), and *Erősítő* (1975, *Comforter*). The analysis focuses on the relationship between the individual and society. The article examines the role Márai attributed to the individual in the historical process. The paper points out further components of Márai's reflection: the mutual conditioning of the individual and society, the transformation of society into a system understood as a mass society, and the cyclical nature of historical processes.

Keywords: Sándor Márai, philosophy of history, individual and society, twentieth century Hungarian literature, exile literature

Introduction¹

The end of hostilities in 1945 enabled a return to literary life in every European country. In the following years, however, the situation in Central and Eastern European countries led to a gradual seizure of power by national communist parties and their dependence on the Soviet Union. The 1945–1948 period, known in the history of Hungarian literature as the time of the three-year literature,² was marked by a certain dichotomy of literary life. On the one hand, there was a revival of independent literary life, but on the other, every sphere of public life was increasingly Sovietized.³

1 The analysis sections of this paper were previously published in Czech: Garbacik-Balakowicz, *Filozofické souvislosti v literárním díle Sándora Máraiho*, 134–60. The text has been reworked and adapted for journal publication.

2 Erdődy, "»Hároméves irodalom«,” 438; Schein, "»Hároméves irodalom«,” 853.

3 For the detailed analysis of this process, see Scheibner, *A magyar irodalomtudomány szovjetizálása*.

These years had a decisive impact also on Sándor Márai's life and career. Sándor Márai (1900–1989) was one of the leading authors of Hungarian modernism in the interwar period, who was critically acclaimed and highly popular with readers. He was a representative of Classical Modernism, which responded to the crisis of representation by seeking narrative forms that unite the polysemic nature of reality, rather than by destabilizing semantics. After the war, his worldview and the social commitment of his texts, both novels and journalism, made him one of the main enemies of the newly built socialist system as a representative of the social class hostile to people's democracy. As Reichert points out,⁴ 1945–1948 was the time of the anti-Márai campaign by the communist press that portrayed him as an enemy of Hungary and a relic of the old world that did not fit into the newly built people's republic. In 1948, Márai decided to leave Hungary and spent the rest of his life in exile.

Looking at the novels Márai wrote after leaving Hungary, we immediately notice a change. The new novels are no longer set in the world of the Hungarian middle class. The short period of 1945–1948 meant that he reevaluated his previous work and career, which he described as a “caricature.”⁵ However, this change does not mean that he questioned or rejected his previous views. On the contrary, the propounded values, the concept of culture and the individual immersed in culture were still the main themes of his novels. This paper analyzes Márai's reflection on history as manifested in his late fiction. I have chosen the following novels for the analysis: *San Gennaro vére* (1965, *The Blood of San Gennaro*), *Ítélet Canudosban* (1970, *Judgment at Canudos*), and *Erősítő* (1975, *Comforter*). Márai placed the plot of his late novels in the context of specific historical events. In the case of *The Blood of San Gennaro*, the storyline is set in Italy in the first years after the end of the Second World War; *Judgment at Canudos* is set in South America during the last days of the War of Canudos; *Comforter* depicts Europe at the time of the Holy Inquisition and the burning of heretics at the stake. Despite their time frame, these are not typical historical novels. Márai's aim was not to faithfully depict the past and historical events, but to reflect on the role of the individual in history and on historical processes in general. Although he depicted historical events, he spoke not only of the past or the present. The historical events of various epochs prompted him to pose questions on such topics as freedom and free choice, oppression, and the violence of the system against individuals, an irrational rebellion against the world, the decline of culture, and the emergence of a new religion.

After 1948, Márai joined the fate of many expatriates, exiles, and émigrés who left their homeland and native culture under duress or voluntarily. In the late 1940s, seeing the increasingly aggressive seizure of power by communist parties and the consolidation of the socialist system, many intellectuals of Central and Eastern Europe fled to

4 Reichert, “A kommunista sajtó Márai-képe”, 106.

5 Márai, *Memoir of Hungary*, 131-2.

the West. Márai emigrated practically at the last minute before the Iron Curtain finally dropped. In the following years, escape from the Eastern Bloc, while not impossible, was much more difficult. Although the history of exile in each Eastern Bloc country reflects the local political and social context and is related to internal developments (such as the 1956 Revolution in Hungary, March 1968 in Poland, or the Prague Spring of 1968 in Czechoslovakia), intellectuals' forms and experiences of exile are generally comparable due to the countries' similar historical situation. As John Neubauer points out, writers' accounts, parallel to juridical records, are the most comprehensive narratives about exile.⁶ Nevertheless, this also applies to works of fiction about everyday life under the socialist system. Although they have not gained as much attention in the West⁷ as, for example, *The Captive Mind* by Czesław Miłosz, *A World Apart. A Memoir of the Gulag* by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, or *The Joke* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, Márai's three novels analyzed in this paper portray with equal depth and nuance the fate of an intellectual in an oppressive system.⁸

The Question of Philosophical Reflection in Sándor Márai's work

Márai was not a philosopher, he was a writer. These two straightforward statements, however, are important when analyzing his work in terms of their philosophical meaning. The object of the analysis is literary texts, more specifically novels. The analysis of Márai's novel is conducted from the perspective of hermeneutics. The propounded philosophy of history does not mean we should search for a complete philosophical (or historical) system embedded in literary works. The philosophical nature of literary texts depends neither on the number of names of philosophers appearing in the novel, nor on the number of inspirations, philosophical or historical theories that can be traced in literary texts. The literary text expresses a hermeneutic experience with an existential dimension. The analysis aims to search the philosophical meaning of a literary text in terms of phronesis, i.e., a special kind of human knowledge about oneself and the world that has both an ethical foundation and a practical dimension.

6 Neubauer, "Exile," 11.

7 To date, they have not been translated into English. Márai did not achieve success in his lifetime comparable to writers in exile from Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Romania. Many factors played a role in this. One of them was certainly Márai's personality and his views. Over his forty years in exile, Márai isolated himself and except his work at *Radio Free Europe* in the early years of his exile, he did not maintain close contacts with Hungarian literary circles in Western Europe or the USA. However, it is also true that Hungarian literature did not have such a strong and influential exile circle as, for example, the Polish exile literature centered around the journal *Kultura* in Paris.

8 This is true also for Márai's other works written in exile, especially his novel *Memoir of Hungary* and his diaries.

The hermeneutic approach to the relationship between literature and philosophy, and more philosophical reading and interpretation of literary texts must consider the individuality of a particular literary work. The novel as a literary form offers concrete philosophical implications. Unlike philosophical texts, the novel is characterized by a different approach to subjectivity through which it seeks to achieve the understanding of the world and humans immersed in it. This approach is always related to the discursive and historical context in which the novel was written.⁹ The way a literary text is shaped has axiological and ethical foundations, but it also has concrete moral consequences, or as Martha Nussbaum calls them, “evaluative commitments.”¹⁰ The analysis of a novel should reveal the “view of life”¹¹ postulated in a literary text, which has a universal character, but is shown in the concreteness of the story told, i.e., through particular characters, particular events, and particular reactions. Literary texts not only allow for reflection on fundamental questions about the world and human life but are also the best possible way for doing so. According to Nussbaum, through its fictionality, literature may become a horizontal (in the sense of providing experiences we have not had) and vertical (in the sense of providing more intense experiences) extension of the reader’s life. Thanks to literature, the reader’s experience becomes richer, deeper, and multidimensional. This existential and practical dimension of literary texts exceeds the possibilities of a strictly philosophical text.

Literature cannot create the coherent system of concepts describing the world; instead, it offers a metaphor of the world as a whole. When it presents philosophical ideas, it shows them as concretized examples of specific characters and actions. This gives philosophical ideas an individual interpretation. Such individual interpretation is found in the three selected novels. The protagonists of Márai’s exile novels (an unnamed scientist in *The Blood of San Gennaro*, Marshal Bittencourt and an unnamed woman in *Judgment at Canudos*, and an unnamed monk and Giordano Bruno in *Comforter*) respond to an existential situation in a specific way. The situation in which the protagonists find themselves has a historical and ideological dimension and can be considered typical of a given time and a given political-geographical context, but each time it demands an individual response.

The Savior in *The Blood of San Gennaro*

The Blood of San Gennaro is Márai’s second novel in exile, first published in German translation in 1957. The Hungarian edition, which had undergone major changes,

9 Cascardi, “The Novel,” 164.

10 Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 26.

11 Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 5.

was published in New York as late as 1965. *The Blood of San Gennaro* seems to be the fictional equivalent of some of the main themes in Márai's autobiographical novel *Memoir of Hungary*, namely the mechanism of a totalitarian system, the reasons why an intellectual decides to leave his homeland, and the situation in Europe in the first post-war years. As he wrote in his diary in response to the positive German reception of the novel, "this book is not »literature«, it is a demand."¹² *The Blood of San Gennaro* is divided into four parts and is built on two forms of narration. In the first two parts, the third-person narrator depicts a magical, but somewhat gloomy Italian landscape and the seaside town of Posillipo. He shows the daily life of its inhabitants waiting for a miracle to change their fate. At the same time, the narrator describes the economic and political situation in Italy and Europe after the Second World War. Images of beautiful nature and the rich Italian culture contrast with the descriptions of post-war poverty and criticism of the political situation. The narration of the first two parts is a mosaic of different, loosely connected scenes, often using an ironic tone, and forms the background to the main part of the novel. These first chapters can also be read as a tribute to Posillipo and Naples where Márai lived from 1948 to 1952. At this stage, the text only signals the main plot of the novel. In several passages, it mentions the arrival of foreigners, emigrants from various European countries. The local inhabitants pay special attention to a silent middle-aged couple. We learn that they came from Eastern Europe and that this unnamed man wants to save the world. The last scene of the second part brings a significant change to the story. The mysterious Eastern European man dies in unexplained circumstances. The third and fourth parts of the novel differ in narration and are reminiscent of Márai's novels written in the 1930s and 1940s. In their structure, they resemble dialogues, but they are in fact extended monologues. The third part consists of a conversation between the commissioner and his detective, as well as of a priest's statement to the police. The fourth part is a confession of the deceased's life partner. The setting and the main protagonist, i.e., the nameless emigrant from Eastern Europe, bring to mind Márai's personal situation. After leaving Hungary, he lived in Posillipo for a few years. He had the opportunity to observe Eastern European emigrants who arrived in Italy from different countries, for different reasons, and for different purposes. Although it is noted at the beginning of the novel that the story and all the characters are fictional, several of its situations must have been true to life. The narrator's comments and the protagonists' monologues form an accurate picture of Márai's experience in Posillipo and of his views on the fate of displaced persons in Europe after the Second World War.¹³ Undoubtedly, *The Blood of San Gennaro* presents the fate of

12 Márai, *A teljes napló: 1957–1958*, 120.

13 Identifying the narrator's voice with Márai's views is based on two factors. The first is the autobiographical nature of his work. According to Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, there is no writer more

emigrants deprived of their homeland. It is a strong critique of Communism and an in-depth description of the functioning of a repressive system. However, looking for its philosophical dimension and the author's reflections on the philosophy of history, we should analyze the question regarding the individual who does not want to be part of a totalitarian system or a world ruled by the masses.

The main protagonist, the nameless scientist and emigrant from behind the Iron Curtain, does not speak a single word in the novel. We get to know his views only from the perspectives of other people and in their interpretation. The three other protagonists, the police officer, the priest, and the man's life partner, only reconstruct the scientist's views. As Ernő Kulcsár Szabó rightly points out, the third and fourth parts of the novel, have an analytical structure.¹⁴ In these parts, Márai uses the technique typical of his earlier works, namely the retardation of the plot. This enables him to conduct an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the individual and the oppressive system. The scientist is characterized in the monologues, testimonies, and interpretations of the three other characters who describe recent events from three different viewpoints. The testimonies are not competing with one another; we do not have to choose the right one. Each of them allows the reader to get to know the unnamed scientist from a slightly different perspective and to capture one individual's multidimensional and complex nature. However, at the same time, they show that one's inner truth can never be fully learned. The monologues touch on several themes: the political and economic situation in Italy and Europe after the war and the situation in the protagonist's homeland, a country behind the Iron Curtain. Through these monologues, the novel intends to answer the metaphorical question of why the scientist wanted to "save" the world, or in other words, why he opposed the system.

autobiographical in Hungarian literature than Márai. See Szegedy-Maszák, *Márai Sándor*, 7. The autobiographical dimension of Márai's work has already been addressed in the secondary literature; these are studies dedicated mainly to certain pieces, like *Egy polgár vallomásai* (Confessions of a Hungarian Bourgeois), *Memoir of Hungary*, and the diaries, see e.g. Z. Varga, "Rewriting History, Reshaping Memory"; Szávai, *A kassai dóm*, 210–26; Mekis, "«...mintha egy vers-sorban úsznék, vagy egy frázisban»,»" 43–76. The second factor is the similarity, or even identity, of the passages in *The Blood of San Gennaro* and Márai's diaries. There are the same themes, motives, and issues. In some passages, we read almost the same words: for example in the descriptions of beautiful Italian nature, the characteristics of Posillipo's inhabitants, or St. Francis's portrayal. This similarity is particularly apparent in issues concerning the worldview, the concept of culture, and the functioning of the totalitarian system. Kulcsár Szabó describes *The Blood of San Gennaro* as one of Márai's literary confessions. See Kulcsár Szabó, "Classical Modernity," 244. Lőrinczy carried out a thorough comparative analysis of the novel's text and Márai's diaries. See: Lőrinczy, "»...lehet-e megváltani a világot?...«" 91–5.

14 Kulcsár Szabó, "Classical Modernity," 244–245.

The very title of the novel, *The Blood of San Gennaro*, and the first chapters address the problem of faith, miracle, and salvation. It approaches the subject on the level of everyday life, asking simple questions about faith, miracle, and holiness that every person could ask. This theme is also apparent in the descriptions of the scientist. The police officer, as well as the townspeople, claim that the man had some special power, “he could do something” and “could help”. People came to him, clung to him, opened up, and confided to him. The scientist would just listen to them, neither judging nor condemning. The police officer even remembers one “miracle”: the scientist lulled a restless handicapped boy. One more feature is revealed in the scientist’s description: he had almost no private belongings, and in his character and behavior he was like ascetics. According to László Rónay, the portrayal of the scientist is a clear reference to the teachings of St. Luke, whose gospel attracted Márai’s attention in the first years of his exile.¹⁵ However, it should be noted that the passages on saints and the question of holiness, virtues, and the possibility of saving people indicate the influence of the Stoic tradition. In the novel, we do not find the negation of corporeality or the rejection of the beauty of this world. On the contrary, the beauty of the world is affirmed in its entirety, the body is not opposed to the soul, and faith is constantly present in the daily lives of local inhabitants. This is apparent, for example, in the passages on eroticism and corporeality, the relationship between St. Francis and St. Clare, or Posillipo residents’ relationship to faith. According to the novel, the saints “lived in perfect intimacy with the Neapolitan family.”¹⁶

The novel sees a higher order in the world and everyday life. The depiction of people, nature, and faith leads to the tradition of late Stoicism (Roman, so-called Late Stoa), and the philosophers who strongly influenced Márai, namely Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Stoicism neither idealized nor condemned man, but accepted man’s weaknesses and sinful nature. It emphasized the equality of all people. In many places, Stoic ethics is similar to Christian ethics. It had such imperatives as to love one’s fellow man, to help and forgive others, to constantly aim for virtue, and to do good deeds for themselves rather than for profit. Stoicism and Christian ethics merge in the novel, which is why its figure of Saint Francis also embodies Stoic virtues. The principles of Stoic ethics had a primarily practical dimension and were to be implemented in everyday life.¹⁷ The journey towards virtue or, more precisely, towards the Stoic ideal is always individual and the goal is achieved by few. The Stoic ideal is aware of his responsibilities and service to others. He is the “wise man”, a citizen who has reached a state of harmony, is virtuous, free, educated, and righteous. Thanks to his own will, behavior, and actions, he improves not only himself but also others.

15 Rónay, *Márai Sándor*, 547–8.

16 Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, 67.

17 Schofield, “Stoic Ethics,” 252.

He can establish order and connect with God, who is understood here as a force present in the entire universe. The scientist in the novel reflects such an ideal believing in the possibility of saving people by showing them their true path in life. In the dispute between believers and non-believers, he appears as deist.¹⁸ The question of suicide in the novel also matches Stoic views. Suicide as a solution can be accepted when it is a reasonable consequence of free choice, a decision preceded by a long reflection devoid of emotion. At the same time, however, suicide may express objection to tyranny.

In his monologue, the police officer emphasizes the scientist's individuality, his personality, and the fact that he was different from other emigrants, which is metaphorically expressed in the phrase "he was not a percentage."¹⁹ This quote addresses the confrontation of an outstanding individual and the oppressing system. The analysis of this topic is undertaken in the monologue of the priest, Padre. Padre reports to the police the scientist's views and gives the reasons why the scientist did not want to stay in his homeland. Padre reveals the functioning of dictatorship and how the totalitarian system treats those individuals who refuse to give up their individuality and personality and maintain their beliefs. Márai's explanation of his decision to emigrate resounds in Padre's words. He shows why, for him, silence was insufficient resistance to a totalitarian system. In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, Márai argues that silent but outstanding intellectuals, whether scientists, artists or writers, are not only tolerated but are actually needed by a repressive system, because it is thanks to them that an authoritarian government can say to the world, "you see, we are not such barbarians..."²⁰ It turns out that eventually the lack of explicit protest means consenting to violence and oppression. The silent intellectual becomes a part of the system, initially only a passive one, but over time, under threat, he will probably actively join the dictatorship.

Therefore, the fundamental and central question of the novel is if man should be understood as an independent and free individual. How will the individual respond to nihilism, the realization of which is bolshevism? In the novel, Communism is presented from the perspective of the threat it poses to individuals rather than from that of physical violence. Communism causes the disintegration of one's personality, that leads to resignation, or even to the negation of the world of moral values. The scientist left his homeland not because he personally suffered violence from communists, but because he feared that he would give up his beliefs and eventually join the communist party.²¹ The notion of one's personality is linked to the con-

18 Cf. Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, 167–8.

19 Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, 135.

20 Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, 150.

21 Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, 192–3.

cept of society and culture governed by a set of specific values. There is a reciprocal conditioning of this relationship. The world is understood as the physical, spiritual, and intellectual sphere of human existence that influences the development and formation of the individual; but also the individual through his own creative activity develops and preserves the world. The moment the world ceases to exist, the destruction of personality and individuality begins. The place of an individual is taken by the masses. In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, Márai continues his reflections that he had already expressed in the novels that were later incorporated into the novel series *A Garrenek műve* (1988, *The Work of the Garrens*).²² In *The Work of the Garrens*, nihilism, which is understood in the novel series as a threat to the world of values, is equated with fascism and Nazism. In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, nihilism is identified with Bolshevism, and its realization with the form of Communism. The main reflection on the role of the individual and the decline of the world of values is the same. In addition, God's death is a common motif in these works. In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, Márai follows Nietzsche's philosophy to some extent, but his thesis is not exactly the Nietzschean "Gott ist tot". Similarly to Nietzsche, for Márai the idea of God's death meant the crisis of the world of values and the destruction of the foundations of morality, which leads to nihilism. However, unlike Nietzsche, Márai did not reject the Christian image of God as such. Nietzsche wanted to fight against nihilism with the revaluation of all values; he wanted to find values that are deeper and more indigenous than Christian values. Márai did not reject the Christian origins of European culture. He saw the rescue for European culture in restoring the dignity of individuality and the personality. However, the novel expresses a certain pessimism in this regard. In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, a free and rational individual with a strong personality is the foundation of morality in society, nihilism, on the other hand, is the destruction of this foundation and the rule of the masses within. According to Márai, nihilism leads to the total destruction of the human being. In the novel, however, the free world of the West is also described as a system because it lacks its essence, i.e., culture. And it turns out to be even more dangerous than this visible one. In Márai's interpretation, in the West the threat of nihilism is hidden in every person. At the time when Europe is no longer understood as a world of values, there is no proper environment for the individual to function. That is why, each person must fight his own battle against nihilism.

According to *The Blood of San Gennaro*, the basic dimension of human existence is the subjective consciousness of one's self immersed in a given world of values. This concept is based on the Cartesian *cogito* tradition where the *cogito* means

22 *The Work of the Garrens* consists of novels published between 1930 and 1948 and originally did not form a novel series. In 1988, Márai merged these novels and published them as one series entitled *The Work of the Garrens*.

the foundation of norms and social principles. The modern world has become an oppressive environment for the individual. *The Blood of San Gennaro*, however, adheres to the *cogito* tradition and rejects all concepts that declare the disintegration of the self and the desire to free the self from the oppressive frameworks of social agreements. The novel does not suggest abandoning the social frameworks of one's existence, but suggests correcting them or, in the words of the novel, "saving people". However, all metaphysical reflections are alien to Márai; instead, he focuses on the individual's relation to the outside world. The novel shows that the relationship between the individual and society is dynamic, which means that the individual and society mutually condition their (co)existence. If society has turned into an oppressive system, this harmonious relationship is no longer possible. A free and active individual is the essence of the common social life and plays a culture-forming role. However, the individual loses his personality and becomes part of the mass. The novel refers to both the totalitarian system and the free West.

In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, the individual's role in society has an ethical dimension and is based on the interplay between reason (intellect) and virtue (morality). This again leads us to the philosophical tradition of Roman Stoics (Seneca and Marcus Aurelius), where the individual is understood as a citizen who has to develop his character within the civil state. Márai's concept of the individual shows characteristics of classic (or conservative) movements in modern literature that opposed the avant-garde that sought to deconstruct the individual. As Kulcsár Szabó points out, *The Blood of San Gennaro* "organically connects different layers of tradition and strengthens the shaken basic values of classical modernism through elements of the Cartesian tradition."²³ Concerning the relationship between the individual and the state, Márai proves to be a Kantianist. Civil society is possible only if there is a mutual relationship between the individual and the state. This needs to be an organic one, where the role of the individual (citizen) is not limited to being a means by which a community is formed but is also the goal of the community's existence.

Is one's sacrifice, an individual attempt to "save the world" an attainable solution? Márai continues to reflect on this topic in his next novel.

The Preacher in *Judgment in Canudos*

Judgment in Canudos is Márai's third novel published in exile. The novel continues to seek an answer to the question posed in *The Blood of San Gennaro*. Can the irrational action of one individual be an example for others, and thus change the

23 Kulcsár Szabó, "Classical Modernity," 228.

world and serve the good of the whole society? Márai places the story in the late nineteenth century in the Canudos War, a violent conflict between the forces of the First Brazilian Republic and the residents of the small village of Canudos in north-east Brazil. The story of Canudos was first told in Euclides da Cunha's non-fictional book *Os Sertões* (1902, *Rebellion in the Backlands*). Márai read da Cunha in an English translation and decided to retell this story in his own way. In the afterword of the novel, he emphasizes he had dealt with the topic of irrational rebellion in society since the beginning of his career. The numerous forms of riots that had taken place in many Western countries in the second half of the twentieth century, specifically the riots of Parisian students in 1968, led him to revisit the subject once again.²⁴

John Neubauer saw in *Judgment in Canudos* and in *The Blood of San Gennaro* Márai's suggestion that irrational actions, such as the probable suicide of the scientist in *The Blood of San Gennaro* or the rebellion in *Judgment in Canudos*, bring hope and offer a possible solution to the conflict between the individual and the system.²⁵ However, despite some similarities between the two novels, the proposed solutions seem different. Márai cannot be considered a proponent of irrational actions. In *The Blood of San Gennaro*, the conflict takes place between the totalitarian system and the individual who wants to follow the example of St. Francis to save people and awaken them from lethargy so that they can regain their individuality. In *Judgment in Canudos*, there is the picture of a violent war between the forces of the republican establishment transformed into a system and religious rioters who are also supporters of some kind of a system. *Judgment in Canudos* demonstrates that anarchy is not the right solution. The range of questions posed by the novel is much broader than just the issue of the irrationality of one's actions. It is also difficult to agree with Neubauer's claim that the character of da Cunha described in the novel as one of the journalists at Marshal Bittencourt's conference is the author's alter ego.²⁶ There is no doubt that many novels in Márai's oeuvre, among them *Judgment in Canudos*, contain sentences that can be easily ascribed to his own views. "Democracy started to eliminate the lack of education by eliminating the uneducated."²⁷ This sentence pronounced by the journalist is most likely to reveal the writer's views. Similar sentences that criticize the brutal suppression of the rebellion are said by the narrator too. We cannot talk of an alter ego in this case. In *Judgment in Canudos*, Márai

24 However, Márai's afterword should not be considered as the best artistic decision. It seems as if Márai was afraid that the text of the novel was not good enough to draw the reader's attention to a universal and current topic. See Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 171–2.

25 Neubauer, "From Diary to Novel," 420.

26 Neubauer, "From Diary to Novel," 420.

27 Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 75.

appears to expose his views thorough criticism and discusses the limits of freedom and free choice. In the dialogue between Marshal Bittencourt and the nameless woman in Canudos, two representatives of the middle class who stand on opposite sides of the dispute, we see Márai's discussion of his own views. And surprisingly, to a certain degree, he seems to agree with both sides. *Judgment in Canudos* reflects the confrontation of two systems of values. And that is the meaning of the word "judgment" in the novel's title.

As Ádám Szabó points out,²⁸ the relationship between the title and the occurrence of "judgment" in the text clearly shows the crucial part of the novel. Szabó rightly emphasizes the key role of the bath scene, on which not only the credibility and acceptance of the later text depends, but to a large degree the entire novel. According to Szabó, the judgment should be linked to a repressive government and system as well as to the marshal, who judges the people of Canudos.²⁹ However, judgment can be interpreted more generally. The conversation between Marshal Bittencourt and the captured Canudos woman can also be called the judgment, as in this conversation two different worlds are confronted. It is precisely in this scene where we can no longer speak of the literary picture of one historical event, but of the author's own reflection on historical processes and socio-political changes. The transformation of a woman, the physical as well as the mental one, at this particular moment of taking a bath and at the moment of arriving in Canudos, becomes a decisive moment.

The story is told by the narrator, whose name is Oliver O'Connel. He is an old librarian who writes his memories of the events he witnessed on 5 October 1897, just at the end of the Canudos War. In order to verify his own words, he briefly presents his life, family, and his roots. We learn that O'Connel's father was an immigrant from Ireland and thanks to him he has learned English and was able to understand the strange conversation between the commander of the army, Marshal Bittencourt, and the captured woman in Canudos. Before recounting this conversation, O'Connel describes the shocking scale of cruelty and atrocities committed during the war. In his words, people have become animals. The naturalistic storytelling raises questions about the meaning of these actions, and the meaning of war in general. Already at the very beginning of the novel, it is suggested that this will not be a story with simple and unambiguous answers. The conflict which seeks to overcome the chaos of the "Lack of Culture" cannot be solved by a simple choice between what is wrong (presumed answer: the rebels) and what is right (presumed answer: the Brazilian military action). The last day of the war, when the forces of the republic announce victory over the rioters, brings a surprising suggestion. The goal of every war is not

28 Szabó, *Canudos ösvényein*, 93–4.

29 Szabó, *Canudos ösvényein*, 104–5.

to win but to give vent to aggressive instincts and kill people without hesitation. The initial impression, that democratic ideas of culture and education are triumphant, proves false.

The main question Márai poses is therefore about limits: the limits of human cruelty, the limits of freedom and free choice, the limits of reason, and the limits of culture. Where is the thin line when one gives up one's reason and completely indulges in blind faith? Where is the thin line when one gives up one's humanity and in the name of freedom deprives others of this very freedom and the right to decide how to live? At what point do democratic ideas turn into an oppressive system? Is the rebellion against norms and the obsessive, irrational faith sufficient reason for bloodshed? What are the conditions needed for the outbreak of an anarchist rebellion rejecting the social contract and social values? *Judgment in Canudos* suggests that the civilized world and culture are unable to prevent people's own cruelty, nor will they guarantee a happy existence for all people, either for the rich or the poor. However, no rebellion, no faith, no anarchy can guarantee this. The image of Canudos is not a positive one. The novel shows that religion can be a huge force that gives hope and could mean liberation for many. But when religion is distorted, it becomes dangerous and deprives people of their freedom. As it turns out, the leader of the religious rebellion in Canudos, a popular preacher called the Counselor, was not an eminent prophet but only a skilled man who knew how to speak to people. The Counselor gave people something the civilized world did not provide, and he took care of all who lacked something. He built the vision of a better world, but over time, his world also became a system like any idea that is distorted and exaggerated to the extreme. Faith in Canudos becomes a system based on irrational religious madness. People were waiting for the end of the world, they rejected the achievements of civilization, and returned to the primitive, wild conditions of human existence. Yes, the people of Canudos rebelled against the world that guaranteed them nothing. Yes, culture has proved insufficient to meet human needs. Yes, the rebellion was a reaction to the lack of help experienced in the world that had turned into system. However, as it turns out, the people of Canudos also lived within some kind of system, only a different one. Canudos was organized not around faith in God, but around one particular person, the Counselor, who was "the mystery and meaning of Canudos."³⁰

Civilization as the technical development of man is not criticized here. Neither is religion. However, both civilization and religion are criticized when they are taken to extremes and are turned into a system that requires blind faith of the individual. *Judgment in Canudos* no longer uses the terminology that was characteristic of *The Work of the Garrens*, i.e., the juxtaposition of culture and civilization. Instead, the

30 Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 61.

freedom-system-anarchy juxtaposition is applied. The author draws a comparison between anarchy and cancer. It is impossible to determine the moment or reasons of when and why the first diseased cell appears, which then grows over time, eventually killing the whole organism. For this reason, I cannot agree with Rónay's interpretation of the novel. According to Rónay,³¹ concerning the question of faith, Márai is on the side of the people of Canudos, who bear the "spirit of freedom". In his interpretation, Rónay ignores the question of anarchy. In Canudos, we do not encounter mysticism, but fanaticism. Also, Huba Lőrinczy emphasizes that the world of Canudos is, after all, also a system, but built on blind faith.³²

During the conversation scene cited above, the marshal asks the woman about newspapers and journals her husband, a respected middle-class doctor, read before fleeing to Canudos. The marshal asks about Nietzsche, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Zeno, and Marx.³³ The novel directly addresses the issue of anarchy. In *Judgment in Canudos*, anarchy means to terminate the existing social contract and replace it with chaos, which also easily transforms into a system and deprives people not only of their personalities but above all of their freedom.³⁴ Over time, anarchy becomes the same system as the one it rebels against. The consequence of understanding religion as an irrational faith is the distortion of this very idea. At the heart of the faith of Canudos rebels were the Counselor himself and the city he had built. At this point, the novel takes a step back from proving the people of Canudos right. The woman says: "once everyone has to go to Canudos."³⁵ The personal experience of faith is an individual path for each person. Faith understood in this way is the expression of human freedom. However, even faith can be used to build a system that sends people to death. Although the Counselor speaks of God, the people of Canudos do not speak of God but of the Counselor. Their salvation is not God, but the Counselor. They do not die in the name of God, but in the name of the Counselor. The novel clearly shows that what they built in Canudos was not a free new world, but rather a new system based on deceptive illusions of religion, salvation, and freedom. We learn from the woman's story that there were prisons, police, and even spies in Canudos, who inform

31 Rónay, *Márai Sándor*, 568–9.

32 Lőrinczy, *Az emigráció jegyében*, 64–9.

33 Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 134–6.

34 In his diaries, Márai often wrote about anarchy, e.g.: "In Tolstoy's Christian anarchy, it is possible to kill. But it is not possible to live because, in anarchy, freedom disappears." Márai, *A teljes napló: 1964–66*, 353. This idea appears in a different form in another place: "Tolstoy. This »Christian anarchy«, which the old man preached, gives people the opportunity to kill, because the meaning of anarchy is that everything is possible... But it is not possible to live in anarchy, because freedom disappears. Freedom that always means the sum of obligations recognized as legitimate and voluntarily accepted." Márai, *Napló: 1958–1967*, 277–8.

35 Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 120.

the Counselor on “suspicious” residents. The novel also suggests the reasons why people rebelled. Culture has changed into a system. At times when culture’s essence, i.e., humanism, is missing, when there is a lack of desire to develop the entire society and not just a selected class, culture becomes the system. And every system, whether political, economic, or religious, is harmful and violent, devaluing its ideals, and depriving people of their freedom in the name of its own ideas.

During the conversation, the marshal seeks an answer to the question of why the people of Canodus rebelled. He sets reason against irrational force; he wants to persuade faith with reason. He has to accept a defeat. It turns out that there is no possible dialogue between the two sides. Two questions remain. Is there any other path for the individual than some form of participation in the system? And who was right, the marshal or the woman? The novel does not answer these questions. At the end of the book, we do not find a definitive solution for which side is good, and which is bad, and what should one do. The novel ends with the vision that the order imposed by violence, even the order of democracy, is as repressive as any totalitarian system, and one will always resist such authority, because “there is something in people that is stronger than Power.”³⁶ An attempt to forcibly “teach” people culture will always have tragic consequences and become a distortion of even the most beautiful progressive ideas. The final scene clearly shows this: the soldiers of the republic kill the prisoners of Canudos, chanting the motto “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” with a smile on their faces.

The Heretic in *Comforter*

The issue of the individual and his place in society is present in all of Márai’s novels written after 1948. In addition to the books analyzed above, they include: *Rómában történt valami* (1871, *Something Has Happened in Rome*), *Erősítő* (1975, *Comforter*), and *Harminc ezüstpénz* (1983, *Thirty Pieces of Silver*). Each of these novels is set in a different, very specific historical context: the Roman Republic at the time of Julius Caesar’s death (*Something Has Happened in Rome*), the Inquisition at the end of the sixteenth century (*Comforter*), and the beginnings of Christianity and Judas betraying Jesus (*Thirty Pieces of Silver*). What joins these novels is an attempt to show the individual in confrontation with ideas, power, and history. Márai uses various historical events to present his own historiosophical reflection, in which the thesis of the cyclical nature of historical processes occupies a central place. *Something Has Happened in Rome*, *Comforter*, and *Thirty Pieces of Silver* present a coherent picture of Márai’s anthropological, historical, and philosophical reflection. At the same

36 Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 164.

time, these novels differ in their artistic quality. *Comforter* may be considered the best of the three.³⁷

Comforter shows the confrontation of the repressive system and the independently thinking individual when the Catholic Church was fighting heresy. The narration is in the first person and the narrator is an unnamed Spanish Carmelite monk who reports to his superiors on his stay in Rome. As we find out, the monk was sent there to explore the secrets of the inquisitor's work. The mechanism of the Inquisition and, more broadly, religion as an institution of power is depicted in the distorted mirror of the naivety and simplicity of the narrator, who is fully committed to his service for the good of the higher idea. Although from the very beginning we know that the monk has resigned from his position and fled to heretical Geneva, his confession contains no criticism of the Santo Ufficio's activities. On the contrary, there is visible zeal, enthusiasm, and blind obedience to his superiors, and an incredible desire to serve the great goal. This is a grotesque novel that shows not only the functioning of one historical institution or the Catholic Church but every form of power that claims full control over the individual. The Church is portrayed not as a community of faith, but as an enslaving institution, at the heart of which lies violence and power. In the novel's world, no one notices the extent to which the demand for submission to the higher idea has receded from the essence of Jesus's teaching. The Church is a system that seeks at all costs to control both the public and the private, the spiritual and intellectual life of society. Márai describes how the Santo Ufficio worked in a way that it is easy to see the similarities with communist power and every form of repressive government in human history. This vision is built by many themes, among them the bureaucratization and hierarchy within the Santo Ufficio's institutions; descriptions of trials, which vividly resemble the public show trials of communist governments; the constant control over both ordinary people and officials; the appropriation of art and science when an outstanding artist can only follow an officially proclaimed idea; the vision of the future where all heretics (or only those who are suspected of being heretics) will be placed in special camps and will be "helped" to leave this world. Similarly to his other novels, it is not only a totalitarian regime that is criticized but the entire Western world. In *Comforter*, the Calvinist Geneva, where the monk flees, is described without any great admiration, since everything is concentrated around the desire for profit and the city turns out

37 *Something has Happened in Rome* and *Thirty Pieces of Silver* are not Márai's best novels. They are stylistically long-winded, somewhat affected, and filled with exaggerated pathos or shallow moralizing that falls into a strong didactic tone. This impression is strengthened by Márai's commentary attached at the end of each novel, which suggests how the novel should be interpreted from the perspective of the modern age. At the same time, they contain beautiful philosophical passages, aphorisms, and sentences.

to be as repressive as Rome. These allusions are obvious, requiring no comment. More interesting, however, is how Márai confronts two types of personalities and the consequences of this confrontation. The first type is the person who believes blindly in the system, while the second type is the person who does not accept that he is deprived of the freedom of thought and speech.

The first type, the completely obedient fanatic believer in the idea, is represented by the narrator himself and all his confreres. This is not a homogeneous group: it includes both the officials who seem to intellectually surpass ordinary servants of faith, and simple faith strengtheners (*confortatore*). The faith strengthener is a person who helps to get back on the path of faith. It may be an ordinary person with no special education; he is characterized by complete obedience to the Santo Ufficio and cannot reflect on his own actions. The second type is a heretic. In order to be considered a heretic, it is enough to show no more than a grain of “weakness”, which may manifest in being too quiet in prayer or insufficient praise for the Santo Ufficio. As the novel states: “The idea, which is also the power, is not satisfied with impartial obedience, the idea requires full atonement and surrender.”³⁸ The majority will succumb under the pressure of the idea. But there will always be people who refuse to give up their reason, freedom, and right to unlimited and creative activity, and will never renounce their beliefs. Giordano Bruno, an Italian poet, philosopher, and cosmological theorist who was burned at the stake for his views, represents this type of person in the novel. Giordano Bruno is a strong personality, sacrificing his life in order to preserve his identity and individuality. In *Comforter*, the need for freedom and the desire to think and create freely turn out to be much stronger than institutional power.

The question remains: Why did the narrator decide to give up his “profession”? Did he leave because he understood that the Santo Ufficio distorted the ideals of faith? It turns out that the monk escaped not because he thought the Inquisition was wrong but because he found that its goals were unattainable. He realized there will always be at least one person who will oppose power and will take other people along.³⁹ *Comforter* shows that every kind of system deprives people of freedom. When faith is transformed into a religious institution in the service of power, it becomes unreliable and denies its own essence. Blind faith and the Santo Ufficio’s establishment are the metaphor of every idea, religious, political, scientific, or philosophical, that becomes the only determinant and the only goal. The system must destroy individuality and the personality in order to obtain this goal. As we read in the novel: “Every Idea that identifies with Power becomes corrupt and cruel.”⁴⁰ Despite the strong pessimism in the description of the functioning of a repressive

38 Márai, *Erősítő*, 29.

39 Márai, *Erősítő*, 210–2.

40 Márai, *Erősítő*, 147.

system, once again we see Márai's strong belief in reason and the individual who will be able to oppose the system even at the cost of his life. In *Comforter*, faith means power. At this point, we can return to the passage cited above from *Judgment in Canudos* and compare it with an almost identical fragment in *Comforter*. First, “[as if the marshal had forgotten] this moment when he realized that there was something in people that was stronger than Power.”⁴¹ Second, “as if the cardinal understood that there was something stronger than Faith.”⁴² Both Marshal Bittencourt in *Judgment in Canudos* and Cardinal Bellarimo in *Comforter* had to acknowledge the defeat of the system they represented. As in Márai's other late novels, *Comforter* shows the confrontation of the system and the strong, independently thinking individual who, despite his tragic end, achieves moral victory. Freedom proves to be a basic condition of human existence. Each person must consciously and individually define freedom not to become an irrational part of the system.

Conclusions

Several common elements can be seen in the novels analyzed in this paper. They are literary adaptations of themes that have been at the center of Márai's interest since the early 1940s. He was interested in the relationship between the individual and society in modern times but placed this relationship in a broader historical context. Based on the above analyses of his three late novels published after 1948, several common characteristics are apparent. First, in his thinking, the basis for society's harmonious development is the free individual. Second, there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and society; one cannot exist without the other. Third, a society deprived of free individuals transforms into an oppressive system. Fourth, history has a cyclical nature with constant confrontation between the individual and the system. The world is changing, but does this mean it is developing in the right direction? The world is certainly growing different, more technically developed but, at the same time, the destructive force that impairs individuals is constantly returning. When culture changes in favor of systematic nihilism, only metaphorical “salvation” can help. The scientist in *The Blood of San Gennaro* “does not see any other way to save mankind than salvation.”⁴³ The vision of the end of a certain historical epoch means the world is deprived of a cultural framework and ruled by the masses. The individual is left to himself and must fight not only for his existence but also for maintaining the integrity of his personality and the balance between reason and faith.

41 Márai, *Ítélet Canudosban*, 164.

42 Márai, *Erősítő*, 159.

43 Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, 159.

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