

## Presence – Donation – Event

Sándor Márai: *The Complete Diary*

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**Abstract.** The Helikon Publishing House has published (2006–2018) Sándor Márai's (1900–1989) diaries in eighteen volumes of eight thousand pages under the title *The Complete Diary*. After Márai left the country for good in 1948 and went into exile, the communist regime eliminated him from the history of Hungarian literature, and generations grew up without reading his books or hearing about him in their literary studies.

The diary is a testament to the existential vulnerability of the writer in exile. This major piece of work has four layers: the first is made up of notes on regular readings, the second is about recent Hungarian history, the third is personal memory, and the fourth is the material for the absorption of the host country's culture.

*The Complete Diary* changes our view of Márai, whose vision of Hungarian history is disturbing. He sees Hungary as a failed attempt to create a modern bourgeois nation. What is unique about Márai's diary is the way it fuses memories of the personal past with reflections on the present. The recording of daily events goes beyond the genre of the diary: on the one hand towards the essay, on the other towards the novel.

**Keywords:** Sándor Márai, diary, personal memory, Hungarian history, exile, strangeness, independent thought

### In what sense is the latest edition of Márai's diaries complete?

Based on an unedited manuscript in the estate, *The Complete Diary* is a series of eighteen volumes of Márai's diaries, eight thousand pages in length, published by the Helikon Publishing House between 2006 and 2018. The surviving manuscript is in a very poor condition and cannot be researched, therefore, for the Márai philology, the printed form of the originally typewritten, fountain pen corrected documents is of great value, as it is more accessible and easier to compare with earlier editions than ever before. Previous editions contained a fairly narrow selection, while *The Complete Diary* contains the all the surviving diaries; consequently, the

text is almost twice as long as the previous editions. Tibor Mészáros spent twelve years putting the text into print.

During Márai's lifetime, six volumes of this material were published in slim anthologies without notes. The diary of 1943–1944 was published in Hungary in 1945,<sup>1</sup> but not the subsequent volumes, and only a few notes were published in the *Magyar Nemzet* daily. After Márai had left the country in 1948 and went into exile, the communist regime erased him from Hungarian literary history, and generations grew up without reading his books or hearing about him in their literary studies. Selected volumes of the diary (1945–1975) published abroad in Hungarian with the author's approval (Washington, 1958; New York, 1968; Toronto, 1976) did not reach the Hungarian reading public either.<sup>2</sup> In 1992, the Canadian-based *Vörösváry Publishing House* launched a series in Hungarian entitled *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt* (Whatever was left out of the diary), a major undertaking, with seven volumes coming out by 2003.<sup>3</sup> Just to give a sense of the proportions: they published over three hundred pages of omitted notes from the 1945–1946 period, unfortunately without notes. *The Complete Diary* is based on the complete manuscript, and the 'omitted' edition also omits a number of texts, some one hundred pages for 1945. *The Complete Diary* can be considered an authentic edition because not even the diary texts published in Márai's lifetime and authorised by him always correspond to the manuscript.

Collections of Márai's diary entries were published in several languages before *The Complete Diary*, covering mainly the early years, the Second World War, the German occupation of Hungary, and the emergence of the post-war communist regime. Typically, the highly successful French selection *Les Années hongroises* (The Hungarian Years), based on *The Complete Diary*, covers the period 1943–1948, the war, the Soviet invasion and exile.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, it won the Best Diary of the Year award Clarens Prize (Prix Clarens du journal intime) in France.

Foreign readers know Márai the diarist as a clear-eyed chronicler of history and a credible eyewitness. In agreement with the canonical interpretation, the present re-reading aims to draw attention to the fact that the textual world of the diary is much more complex than the recording of historical events. My basic thesis is that the diary is a testament to the existential vulnerability of the writer in exile.<sup>5</sup> It is

1 Márai, *Napló (1943–1944)*.

2 Márai, *Napló (1945–1957)*; Márai, *Napló (1958–1967)*; Márai, *Napló (1968–1975)*.

3 Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1945–1946*; Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1947*; Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1984–1989*; Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1948*; Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1949*; Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1950–1951–1952*; Márai, *Ami a Naplóból kimaradt 1953–1954–1955*.

4 Márai, *Journal, Les années hongroises 1943–1948*.

5 This possibility of interpretation is not raised by the article published in the volume of studies

written as a fight against the temptation of emptiness, aimlessness, depression, and indifference. Márai attempts to regain presence in his diary, which he kept until the end of his life; writing a diary is a performative activity for him, aimed at consolidating his presence.

### Interpretative framework: presence – donation – event

The title of this study refers to both Heidegger and Derrida, emphasising the event nature of the donation. In connection with the aporia of the secret without a secret, Derrida quotes the famous thesis of *Zeit und Sein* (1962): “Die Gabe von Anwesen ist Eigentum des Ereignens”<sup>6</sup>—“The gift of presence is the property of the event.”<sup>7</sup> In relation to the extensive text of Márai’s diary, this adjective is striking in the gift-like moments of life that, when captured, become a captivating event, as an insignificant moment is filled up in a flash, and the diarist is touched by the suspicion that perhaps this is why it is still worth living. His vivid insights are due to the captivating linguistic power of the formulation and the event of the recording. For example, Márai’s entry in 1945 captures an image of the bombed Danube Bridge in Budapest: “The dark city is terrifying, magically beautiful in this ominous, misty light. The shadow of the wrecked Margaret Bridge, like the carcass of a fearful prehistoric beast fallen on its knees in wound; and opposite, in the mist and silver light, the dome of the Parliament! Now is great Pest, real, real, like all that has had its day.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the aims of Márai’s diary is to bear witness to his own time, to pass on to future generations the historical experiences he personally participated in, received as gifts and witnessed. The experiencing self, which has suffered and shaped

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on the literature of exile, based on the three-volume Polish edition of Márai’s diary (covering the years 1943–1989), which emphasizes the common feature of the representation of twentieth-century Central and Eastern European history: Bolecki, *Exile Diaries*.

6 Heidegger, “*Zeit und Sein*,” 27.

7 I have modified the English translation of Heidegger’s sentence (“The gift of presence is a property of Appropriating”): Derrida, *Given Time*, 127. Here, in the passage cited, Derrida refers back to the fact that the problem of donation was already written into the text that bore the title ‘Difference’. Here, analysing a saying of Heidegger (*Die Gabe von Anwesen ist Eigentum des Ereignens* [The gift of presence is the property of the event]), Derrida was about to make clear that “the difference has no essence” ... “everything taken in general as such threatens its power...” Ultimately, he says the same of the gift... “Dissociation is not a »species« of the ontological-difference gender. If the gift of presence is the property of the event, the »difference« is not a process that runs out of the property of the event. It is (i.e., the elimination of) neither its assumption (appropriation) nor its negation (appropriation), but the other. Thus, it would seem that »difference« like being, is not a species of event.” Derrida, *Given Time*, 127–8.

8 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1945*, 337. All translations from this volume are mine.

historical events according to its own possibilities, differs from the retrospective self of the diarist in the changing dynamics of spatial and temporal distance. “I expect nothing, I fear nothing, I believe in nothing.”<sup>9</sup> Márai is aware that the only way to be present in the world is by writing all the time. “But until the last moment, in a purposeless and meaningless universe, one must do something that has a purpose and a meaning”,<sup>10</sup> Márai wrote in 1971. Voluntary exile, however, is a state accompanied by nothingness, by a chilling silence: “In the fearful emptiness that is life spent in alienation, in the alienation of numbers – every day begins as if in a moment of enlightenment of consciousness, in a cruel, merciless bright light [...] the waking one stands on the edge of a steep precipice – it is very difficult to live through the day without feeling dizzy, without falling into this precipice.”<sup>11</sup> Between two changes of location, the presence of the stranger is always temporary and transitory, like that of the diarist, who is present in the text that is constantly being created, and when he re-reads his earlier notes, he often finds that he does not recognise himself: “Between photographs, small mementos, sometimes the memory of the person I was ten or fifty or seventy years ago comes alive for a moment. These personalities are completely alien to me: I feel no identity with myself thirty or fifty years ago. In the photographs, a perfect stranger looks back at me like a passing acquaintance I’ve seen before.”<sup>12</sup>

Márai struggles for decades against the onslaught of depression, disinterest, and the call of death. Sensing a loss of attention, of the ability to think—linked to his alcohol addiction, his short-lived drug use, and his mood disorder—he keeps his self in constant writing as a defence. For nearly half a century, Márai practises mental concentration with great awareness: he tries to keep his personality together by completing the daily task of reading and writing. He is often overcome by depression and a sense of malaise, yet it is not melancholy but considered indifference that fundamentally determines his mood. But he never loses his curiosity thanks to his unquenchable passion for reading: “To read more. Read more. Read every moment. At times like this, when I think of reading opportunities and omissions, I am struck by how short life is. I honestly don’t regret what I haven’t lived – but I regret a lot of things I haven’t read.”<sup>13</sup>

The daily records give us a chance to ensure that the memory of the self and the language it is meant to preserve do not become nothing, do not wear away: “The only thing that is certain is that the Hungarian language is the strongest bond

9 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1970–73*, 105.

10 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1970–73*, 350.

11 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1970–73*, 232.

12 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1970–73*, 184.

13 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1952–53*, 28.

in my life, everything else is a fog and a nightmare. [...] [N]either do I particularly long for ‘home’. I only long to go home to the language.”<sup>14</sup> For half a century, Márai was vigilantly watching to see if he could detect the nuances in the meaning of words when their place value changes. In all the phases of his emigration (1948–1952: Italy, Naples; 1952–1967: United States, New York; 1967–1980: Italy, Salerno; 1980–1989: United States, San Diego), which began voluntarily and temporarily in 1948 but became permanent, he made a constant effort to preserve the presence and vitality of the mother tongue in his daily use of foreign languages. “I begin the day in Hungarian (Bible, Arany, Vörösmarty), continue in English, German or Italian (Shakespeare, Goethe, the morning paper) [...] with a dash of French [...] The Tower of Babel must have been a well-organised Berlitz school for the linguistic confusion of exile.”<sup>15</sup> The asymmetry of word and sense is reflected in the diary’s use of language, which becomes more antiquated with the passage of time. Indeed, Márai’s writing preserves the linguistic state of the interwar period. Once again, having left his mother tongue, he has the painful experience of forgetting language: he cannot remember words or is not aware of the meaning of certain expressions. The writer’s presence is determined by his relationship to the marker in the general and specific sense of the word. For Márai, the alienation of language, its becoming external, other, was a personal experience. Isolated from the living language, he was writing his works, which remained unheard at the time of their publication. The diary is testimony to the writer’s vulnerability existing in language.

In *The Complete Diary*, the linguistic event that occurs can also be interpreted as testimony. The vivid recognition that accompanies the “word magic” is twofold. He notices the role of language as a co-author and the fact that he is unable to objectify what is reflected in the utterance. One moment of the linguistic event of coming into being is thus involuntary and event-like, the other, which it bears witness to, is a partially reflected experience. Márai’s account of his perplexing dreams, which go beyond his meaning, can be cited as a poignant example of the witnessing of a linguistic event. However, while describing them, he comes across a word that proves to be a gift, illuminating not only in relation to the archived event, but also in relation to the event of archiving: “Strange dreams. I’m making love—I don’t know who?—and my father lies between me and the partner. Then my younger brother appears, his hair is blonde and girlishly long, because he is ‘crazy’. I am afraid in my dream that I too will ‘go crazy’. ‘Blood-stimulating’ and ‘blood-curdling. Strong Hungarian words. Our language is beautiful.”<sup>16</sup> Recording the dream brings the diarist back to the original experience of language, to the unstoppable resonance of

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14 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1952–53*, 66.

15 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1952–53*, 403.

16 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1952–53*, 277.

the words: “Blood-stimulating” and “blood-curdling”. The gift of presence is not an objectifiable experience either, it cannot be directly ascertained, it cannot be exchanged for anything else, so it can only be witnessed. When the diarist testifies, makes a voluntary linguistic statement, the actual utterance testifies to the intended meaning, and the difference between the two cannot be eliminated: “New Year. The Danube is as smooth as a mirror, like still water. Gentle refraction of light over the tamed landscape. Wild geese swim and bathe peacefully in the water. A year ago today, corpses were floating, with their hands and feet tied.”<sup>17</sup> Márai’s performative description refers to the fact that Hungarian Jews were shot into the Danube during the German occupation.

In principle, the diary minimises the distance between experience and expression, even though external events and spiritual events cannot coincide, their relationship being determined by temporal separation. In Márai’s case, moreover, the sources of the primary experiences that define the writer’s personality are earlier than the time of the daily entries, which are increasingly distanced from them; this temporal asynchrony is thus inscribed in the diary. The medial base of perception changed considerably in fifty years. Márai read mainly books, newspapers, and magazines, but would also listen to the radio every day, and from the 1950s onwards, watched television, mainly news programmes. He regularly went to the cinema. Later, he bought a TV, a tape recorder, a camera, and a film recorder. He had a Remington typewriter with Hungarian characters made to order, but he also insisted on using his ancient fountain pen. He lived in a book culture, and the library was his most important place of orientation in emigration. The diary was a medium of intellectual transcendence, a field of free and sovereign thought even in the most difficult existential circumstances and at the darkest moments of his life. For years, Márai was in danger of financial collapse. In 1949, the sale of Lola’s fur coat—and in Naples—was the only way to make it to the end of the month. In his desperate situation, he used the last of his money to enrol at the French library to borrow books. “I have no other way to read a book but at home: reading in public is an obscenity.”<sup>18</sup>

Márai reads in five languages with total devotion and passion. He regularly reviews his books, and the interpretation of the text forces him to constantly concentrate. Uncertain of the existence of his property, he rereads his diary almost continuously. The most important prerequisite for diary writing, which carries the gift of presence, is the gathering of spiritual forces, a constant readiness: “Whenever there is the call to action, we must immediately drop everything [...] and get to work.”<sup>19</sup> He often uses an indirect self-invitation: “Diary 58–65 will go to press this summer. Then

17 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1946*, 7.

18 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1952–53*, 325.

19 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1946*, 182.

I'll start work on *Canudos* and *Earth, Earth*.<sup>20</sup> A motto-like formulation of rules of life and the principles guiding behaviour subordinated to writing: "To live coldly and resolutely,"<sup>21</sup> elsewhere: "One must endure everything."<sup>22</sup> Blanchot says that he who keeps a diary does not live, nor does he write in the absolute sense of writing.<sup>23</sup> Márai, by contrast, hopes to consolidate his disappearing presence in the diary, which he does not see as a foyer of the literary text. The diarist shapes his earlier notes, transposing ideas from elsewhere that he considers relevant. When re-reading, he adds to, completes, and modifies the text. Márai writes as regularly as he reads his diary. He often revises his earlier positions and assessments of a situation, while at other times things that he seems to have forgotten become clear to him.

### Layers of the diary

*The Complete Diary* resists easy perusal. It has four main layers: the first is made up of notes concerning Márai's regular reading, the second is about recent Hungarian history, the third is personal memory, and the fourth is the material provided by the absorption of the host country's culture. A large part of *The Complete Diary* is made up of notes on readings. Márai quotes in the original language, adding Hungarian explanations to the Latin, English, German, French and Italian texts, which he invites the reader to reconsider. These extracts and commentaries are the bearers of the writer's implicit personality. The subject matter of the quotations is varied, some of them relating to the ancient tradition of the hypomnemata, the individual note as a reminder, whose author has collected examples and arguments on how to master oneself and overcome difficult situations in life. In *The Complete Diary*, the activities of writing and reading are thus inextricably linked. Therefore, some texts are deeply engraved in the soul. Márai creates an intellectual past for himself out of the readings he has collected in his writing, since there is no signifiable goal to turn it towards the future, and only the state of living in a foreign country appears to be permanent: "The journey to Munich and back. In a sleeping car. I read it all the way through. The letter is still more interesting than the landscape. The description of a landscape tells me more than the landscape it describes."<sup>24</sup> "Memories of a fading culture"<sup>25</sup> are linked to Márai's readings, maintaining his fascination with the manifestation of a pure spirit: "Valéry: The Soul and the Dance. One of those

20 Márai, *The Complete Diary* 1967, 86.

21 Márai, *The Complete Diary* 1946, 10.

22 Márai, *The Complete Diary* 1946, 19.

23 Blanchot, *The Diary and the Narrative*, 12.

24 Márai, *The Complete Diary* 1950–51, 405.

25 Márai, *The Complete Diary* 1946, 244.



rare writings that immediately, with the first word, lift the reader out of the volume of ordinary thought, the soul begins to float on reading these lines, feeling their true weight. [...] It is more than poetry and prose; it is melodious Thought.”<sup>26</sup> Márai says he does not read philosophy, although he refers to many contemporary philosophers and reads the works of Sartre, Lacan, and Braudel. Reflecting on the purposelessness of existence and words, he reports on *The Times Literary Supplement*'s compilation of essays on Samuel Beckett's sixtieth birthday, studies the proceedings of the Joyce symposium in Paris in the 1970s, and looks at recent developments in psychoanalysis. It is well known that the detachment of the soul from an uncertain future is a life practice linked to the Stoic and Epicurean tradition.

Márai cannot detach himself from the concerns of Hungary's historical past throughout the diary. He bears with unshakable calm whatever fate has imposed upon him. He literally lost his home, and figuratively also his homeland, before leaving Hungary: “For me, Trianon<sup>27</sup> was a trauma; half my life I was tormented by it. No longer though. For me, the real trauma is not the Hungary that was lost – the historical one – but the one that remains.”<sup>28</sup> He always found a way to go against the tide and to actively express his attitude to events beyond his control: “On 4 April 1944, when the compulsory wearing of the yellow star was ordered, I shamefully pulled off my father's ring of arms and threw it in a drawer: I did not want to wear a »distinctive badge« at a time when others were wearing a stain of shame.”<sup>29</sup> Márai vehemently rejects historical revenge for the terrible losses suffered. He is firmly convinced that it is a grave mistake to overlook individual responsibility, because justice and reparation cannot be served by punishment based on collective guilt. For example, the expulsion of Germans in Hungary after the Second World War, between 1946 and 1948, was a collective punishment. Márai's vision of Hungarians is disturbing. He sees all attempts to create a modern nation as doomed to failure: “How the same brokenness haunted every noble Hungarian soul, every Hungarian

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26 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1946*, 244.

27 The Treaty of Trianon was prepared at the Paris Peace Conference and was signed in the Grand Trianon Château in Versailles on 4 June 1920. The treaty regulated the status of the Kingdom of Hungary and defined its borders generally within the ceasefire lines established in November–December 1918 and left Hungary as a landlocked state that included 93,073 square kilometres, 28% of the 325,411 square kilometres that had constituted the pre-war Kingdom of Hungary (the Hungarian half of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy).

28 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1946*, 259.

29 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1946*, 92.—In Hungary, Government Decree No. 1240 of 1944 on the Distinctive Marking of Jews [6] required Jews to wear the yellow star, effective 5 April 1944. The restrictions and prohibitions on the yellow star remained in force until the collapse of the Nazi, so-called Arrow Cross regime in Hungary. On 6 February 1945, the Provisional National Government officially repealed the Jewish laws by decree.



from Vörösmarty<sup>30</sup> and Széchenyi,<sup>31</sup> who wanted to make a nation out of a tribe and one day found that the material he had to work with was unsuitable for the task.”<sup>32</sup>

Márai’s intellectual independence, his open-minded and value-preserving attitude, his multiple attachments are decisive in his relationship to tradition. As a defender of the values of the bourgeoisie, he is equally distanced from the camp representing the two extreme poles of politics: “The intellectual, bourgeois left-wing Bolshevik is just as intolerable a phenomenon as the »right-wing Christian Hungarian gentleman«.”<sup>33</sup> His self-contained view of history makes him an ideologically difficult (or rather divisive) figure. The fact that he considers the character flaws of the model Hungarian ruling classes irremediable can be explained by his shattered sense of national identity. In his view, there is no one to replace the bourgeoisie as culture-creators and culture-bearers, which is why anti-cultural forces may play a role for a long time at home: “The balkanisation of Hungary [...] can only be prevented by a self-conscious, educated bourgeoisie, a type of people that is completely missing in our country. The counter-selection of the past twenty-five years has deliberately pushed back attempts to educate a democratic middle class – everyone who talked about democratic education was suspect, whether a Jewish heretic or a secret Bolshevik. Now it is precisely this layer that is missing.”<sup>34</sup> For Márai, culture was the lost home: “For twenty-five years a society denied culture. The rest is just a consequence.”<sup>35</sup> His overheated outbursts against the celebrated writers of the communist regime are repeated endlessly in the diary.<sup>36</sup> The communist regime persecuted the bourgeoisie, nationalised their property, and prevented young people

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30 Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855) is one of the greatest Hungarian Romantic poets. The *Szózat* [Appeal] (1836) is Vörösmarty’s poem set to music and, along with Ferenc Kölcsey’s *Himnusz* [Hymn], the national song of Hungarians.

31 István Széchenyi (1791–1860), statesman, imperial and royal chamberlain, writer, polymath, economist, minister of transport in Hungary’s first responsible government (1848), “the greatest Hungarian.” One of the founders of modern Hungary through his ideas, influence, and practical work.

32 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1947*, 183.

33 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1952–53*, 93.

34 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1943–44*, 155.

35 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1943–44*, 336.

36 Márai judges the representatives of the Western Left perhaps even more harshly than the systemic supporters of the countries of the Soviet sphere of influence: “Sartre: he has infected an intellectual generation with an unbearable contagion. The babbling Marxist literary man who sees the future of the »liberated writer« in »a classless society«. This wordless philosophizing has infected a generation of intellectuals who today proclaim themselves »left-wing« and do not know that the »classless society\*« (which does not exist, never did and never can, because without class there is only the mass, there is no »society«) is the first to be dumped: the writer whom the masses do not need.” Márai, *The Complete Diary 1970–73*, 187.

of bourgeois origin from going to university. Márai had a scathing opinion of the ‘holdouts of the state’, the leading intellectuals who collaborated with the authorities. The inner freedom he had won made him resistant to the most oppressive circumstances. When his publisher is nationalised after 1945, he is deprived of the possibility of publication, of authorial autonomy, of everything that is the basis of his existence as a writer. He has no access even to his own books in storage at home. That is the time when he decides he must leave, with no choice but voluntary exile. Home becomes ‘portable’ after he leaves the country for good in 1948.<sup>37</sup>

*The Complete Diary* is devoid of any sentimentality. The writer accepts life’s most difficult trials with a fearless composure, a disciplined, dispassionate attitude. He has barely enough money for a month, he cannot travel, which is essential for him when he is invited by the organisers, all expenses paid, to a conference in Switzerland where Ortega and Benda will give a lecture, but he does not go: “For all the deep solidarity I feel with Hungarians, I have no strength of spirit to stand up in front of the world in the company of those who represent Hungarians before the world today.”<sup>38</sup> The once cozy world is alienated; in some of the diary’s formulations, we see the idea of the collective guilt of writers, artists and scientists who compromised with the communist regime, which Márai consciously defended himself against. The diary mercilessly exposes the unprincipled selfishness and false victimhood rhetoric of writers collaborating with the authorities but assures the regime’s innocent victims of his solidarity.

In terms of personal memory, I would highlight the expansiveness of time, which is unique in the diary. The written manifestation requires a certain distance from the narrated story, whereas the lived present presupposes a closer proximity.<sup>39</sup> Márai’s style of writing seems to invert this relationship: the proximity of the re-lived past makes the present seem distant. At the same time, memory is oriented towards the future as far as it helps the diarist to consolidate the present. There is no sharp distinction between “self-archiving”, the recording of the events of the present, and the autobiographical narrative of the past in the diary that he kept for more than four decades. Márai often evokes the same period, the historical shock and consequences of the so-called ‘Emergency Era’, right up to the present day. The ‘Emergency Era’ refers to the years of discrimination and attempted extermination of the Hungarian Jewry. Sometimes he recalls the same story several times. István Vas<sup>40</sup> “accompanies his old mother on a boat, chased by the rain, marching along the highway towards

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37 “For me, too, there was a »home«, but a portable, foldable and packable, hand-baggable home – a poem, a doorway, a face, a landscape, a little of everything. I carry this home between continents in a handbag.” Márai, *The Complete Diary 1978–81*, 64.

38 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1949*, 402.

39 Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II*, 476.

40 István Vas (1910–1991) Hungarian poet, writer, literary translator.

Újpest, and then loses sight of her. And at night (he) wishes that his mother would be shot dead by the Arrow Cross men on the rainy highway. I remember the marches. Is it possible to forget? [...] What would we Christians think and do after such experiences? It's a horrible world, horrible, irredeemable, unbearable."<sup>41</sup> Repetition leads to narrative variations. The difference is at work in the commentary on the story, reassessing the exemplary value of the event. Márai cannot get rid of the problem of the desire to convince, he is compelled to return to some historical questions: victims must not take revenge on perpetrators for the pain they have suffered by using the perpetrators' tools, because then they lose their dignity. He consistently distinguishes between occupied and conquered countries and the homeland. Hungary was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1944–1945, and subsequently by the Soviet Union in 1945–1991. There are such repetitions throughout the diary, even after repeated re-readings of the published texts and the manuscript, and even after the deletion of certain parts, therefore these recurring elements are given particular emphasis.

Keeping a diary spanning several decades is an activity fragmented over time, which gradually transforms for the writer and the reader: the areas opened up in personal reflection, the common perspectives, the recurring themes and moods also create continuity in the text, which is sometimes interrupted. Parts of the diary appear in the meantime. In preparation for the editions, the writer combs through, supplements, and edits his notes. The text is composed of discrete elements which are rearranged and interwoven not only by the writer but also by the reader, creating his own construction. In the use of the diary, time is transformed into space. The basic structure is made up of daily notes, which are assembled into a series. The spatialisation of time is the organising principle of Márai's diary in the strict sense of the word. Each period of his life in voluntary exile is associated with a chosen place: Naples, New York, Posilippo, San Diego. The interrelationship of time and space is determined by the fact that the daily entries, the density, and length of which vary are arranged around strange homes. There are regular entries, but months can pass between entries.

The chronological ordering of published volumes by year forms a continuum, but the rhythm of the narrative varies. There is a wide variation between the length of a volume and the time it covers. He devotes 379 pages to 1967–1969, but 383 pages to 1982–1989: Notes of two years and seven years are almost equal in length. The pace of the narrative in the earlier volume is much slower than in the later one. Subsequent editing of the diary reinforces and highlights the internal connections of the consolidated text. At the same time, the complexity of the work is heightened by the variability of the historical situation, thanks to its trans-periodic time span, and by the reader's work of reordering, determined by the assemblage, following the

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41 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1947*, 108.

tradition of book reading. The tension of the section and the process arises from the fact that the reader creates a life story out of the daily records, that is, transforms the ‘snapshots’ of the diary into a time stream, bridging the missing periods with psychological, poetic, and other explanations.

Márai regularly rereads his notes, but after keeping a diary for publication, he is driven not only by the desire to recall and relive fateful events, but also by an exceptional artistic spirit. The need to perfect his writing is an enduring impulse for him. Sincerity, accuracy or authenticity are not the only yardsticks for the quality of a text; Márai also applies aesthetic and poetic considerations. His writing is not primarily concerned with the referential requirement of factual verifiability and traceability.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes his memory cheats him, but it also happens that he simply miscalculates how long it has been since an event occurred. The characteristics of intimacy and secrecy make it impossible to define a complete diary. Márai’s attention to the self does not reveal the inner world of the personality, it seems he had reservations about the formula of a personality divided into body and soul, outer appearance, and inner essence. Moving away from the notion of the personality as an organic whole, the privileged position of the self is eliminated.

Márai’s personal notes are far from intimate: when he writes about the memory of the body, he primarily reports specific sensory experiences, barely touching on spiritual emotions, as if he were beyond intimacy in terms of the essence of the self. He does not hide a single moment of his reflection, he is trained in introspection, so he puts everything down on paper and nothing can distract him from ruthlessly confronting his former self. Writing is the cultivation of thinking, of understanding. Márai does not offer the reader of the diary the position of a confidant friend, he does not create intimate circumstances in which to honestly reveal his innermost feelings to the recipient, because he makes his private life independent of all external expectations. He is not ashamed of anything; he speaks with unvarnished frankness about his dizzying youthful adventures, his astonishing sensual discoveries in Germany in the 1920s, some of the details of which he did not reveal in his autobiographical novel, *Confessions of a Citizen*. The writing heightens rather than dampens the excitement of bodily memory. Márai was already an elderly man when he asserted the unconditional value of sensory experience, which cannot be replaced by anything else. For the diarist, there is no prohibition on talking about the body, no guilt about sexuality.

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42 In his approach to autobiography and the diary, János Szávai recalls Ricoeur’s conceptual distinction in *Temps et récit*, when he examines the relationship between fiction and story-writing. According to the reader’s expectations, the references of autobiography and diary are “both traceable (*références par trace*), i.e., they can be verified and controlled, and are metaphorical (*référence métaphorique*), which essentially means that autofiction is also a work of art that creates a complete world.” Szávai, *Literature, fiction, autofiction*, 29.

In Márai's diaries, the examination of conscience, the clarification of one's relation to oneself, or any other mental task does not play a primary role in recording memory. He was always convinced of the correctness of his most important life decisions, never for a moment doubting that he had to leave Hungary for good. The self that emerges in the diary is created, but it is not given pride of place, it does not become the organising centre of the text. The writer does not keep silent about the problems of the body, the experience of sensuality and addiction, alcohol addiction, chain-smoking and temporary drug use, but the intimate inner world is merely an extension of the self, alongside the external relations of the personality interacting with changing historical contexts, different cultures, languages, and readings. The peculiarity of Márai's diary is that it fuses memories of the personal past with a present-self record, but neither is confined to the private sphere; both the autobiographical narrative and the recording of daily events transcend their own genre boundaries: on the one hand, towards the essay, the reflection, on the other, towards the novel.

The preconditions for perceiving, reading, and understanding European culture changed radically in the second half of the twentieth century. Márai's diary is a testimony to this change of epoch, the basic experience of which is that of time gone by, as Proust says: "the reality I knew no longer existed." At the same time, Márai, taking stock of the achievements of the last century, takes a sufficiently detached view of universal histories of decline. He is alert to the experiential spaces opened up by new media. Watching live television coverage, he is concerned with the effects of the simultaneous experience of events. In a world dominated by technology, man tries to compensate for his lack of experience of being present by the appearance of immediacy. Publishers and leading newspapers, notably *Die Zeit*, confront Márai with a change in reading habits. Their expectations, adapted to the competing market demands of the media configurations, are formulated with ruthless clarity: the busy speed-reader of our time must write in easy to understand, unadorned language, confined to the reporting of facts. Márai reluctantly acknowledges the atrophy of a refined sense of linguistic nuance, the end of the era of the reader who lingered attentively in the complexity of language, although his individual style of writing also changes over time, and in the diary he himself becomes alienated from his own idiolect, from 'Maraism'.

For Márai, the diary as a work of literature is justified. Considered as a system of self-archiving, the diary is a medium-sensitive genre. Personal history, historicity in the spiritual sense, is clearly defined. The overall period of writing spans more than half a century, during which there was a change in the state of the Hungarian language and culture, the material, intellectual and institutional conditions for the cultivation of literature, and the sociological and sociological milieu under which Márai lived in Hungary and in emigration. Who produces the self that is shaped in

the daily records? A person or an apparatus, or both? From the entire diary material, we can deduce the anthropological conception of the creation of language, according to which human consciousness, will, intention, motive, and authority are linked to what is said and the conditions of saying it. The notion of the human being with unique qualities, with a distinct life course, which gradually becomes invalid in the diary, corresponds to the notion of language as a co-creator: “Man no longer has a name, nor a personality, nor a destiny: he is only a statistic.”<sup>43</sup> When he is commissioned to write for Radio Free Europe, he realises whether the work of writing is the product of a machine or of a programmatic transcription system: “Now that I write what I have to say to the radio every week with stopwatches and mechanically calculated punctuation, I feel at once homesick for handwriting—for my diary [...] and for the little I have left to write for myself, and so I write beyond that. [...] The second hand moves forward, speeds up or slows down the rhythm of the thought.”<sup>44</sup> The tension between the creative process, based on the presupposition of an irreplaceably specific meaning, and the medium, ultimately between man and technology, is palpable throughout the diary. Márai tells “his own story” from his position as a witness. His subjective experiences are inseparable from Hungarian history, and his self-narrative therefore meets various reader expectations. *The Complete Diary* can be read both as a chronicle of the fateful historical events of the twentieth century and as a unique self-expression that claims its own truth.

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44 Márai, *The Complete Diary 1950–51*, 411.



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