

CONTEMPORARY AND RECENT HUNGARIAN FICTION

Reception and Cross-Cultural Interpretations

Edited by

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Budapest, 2022

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ISBN 978-963-489-529-9

ISBN 978-963-489-530-5 (pdf)

The project “Contemporary and Recent Hungarian Fiction: Reception and Cross-Cultural Interpretations” and the publication of this book were supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office within the framework of the Thematic Excellence Program: “Community building: family and nation, tradition and innovation,” ELTE 2019/20.

Published by Eötvös Loránd University
in collaboration with Cser Publishing House and ELTE University Press.

Executive Publisher: Dávid Bartus, Dean, Faculty of Humanities,
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest
Publishing Editor: Katalin Tihanyi
Publishing Manager: Nóra Csanádi-Egresi
Layout and cover design: Andrea Balázs
Printed by Multiszolg Ltd.

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Taking Offence at the World:
The Reception of Georges
Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892)
in Sándor Márai's *Sirály* (1943)



Since the turn of the century, Sándor Márai's writings seem to have recovered a European audience. The success of German and Italian versions of *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (*Embers*, originally published in 1942) has been followed by a spate of new translations. As Adam Zagajewski wrote in 2010, "Sándor Márai ist aus dem Pantheon der Weltliteratur nicht mehr wegzudenken (It has become impossible to think about the pantheon of world literature without Sándor Márai)" (220). Definitions of world literature often depend on critics' own location in the world, however; to many outside of Europe, indeed, Márai's resurgence has appeared enigmatic. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, for instance, J. M. Coetzee confesses himself to be mystified by the "flare-up of interest in Márai in Europe" (Coetzee 108). One cannot help but notice, though, that the "austere fatalism" (Coetzee 99) for which Coetzee faults Márai's work—and which, one might note, is shared by some of Coetzee's own characters, such as David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999)—presents a possible explanation for its appeal: many of Márai's books express a nostalgia for the accomplishments of a vanishing European culture. These accomplishments were as illusory and fraught in the interwar period as they are now, but their attraction remains potent. An appreciation of this sense of fatalism, and of the resentment or sense of offense by which it is accompanied, may perhaps account for a part of Márai's allure in contemporary Europe. The goal of this article is to come closer to the origins of this fatalism. Building on recent investigations that have situated Márai's work in the context of European literary history (e.g. Kányádi), I aim to probe into some lesser-known literary sources of

Márai's worldview and to explore its aesthetic and political ramifications. While his fatalism cannot be understood without reference to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler, I hope to expand our understanding of this element in his thinking by dwelling on the intersection between Márai's modernist prose and the symbolist and decadent writings of Georges Rodenbach.¹ I would argue that in *Sirály* (*Seagull*, 1943) Márai creatively rewrites Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892) and that this intertextual relationship sheds some new light on Márai's bourgeois conceptualisation of European culture, just as it was about to be erased.

Sirály opens with a striking passage, as the novel's protagonist, a high-ranking civil servant who remains nameless, closes the fountain pen with which he has written a declaration of war. Given this task, one may assume that he is stationed in the foreign office. He is visited by a Finnish girl, Aino Laine, who has come to ask him for support in her visa application, so that she can work as a teacher. This girl is much more than she appears to be, in a figurative as well as a literal sense: her outer appearance is identical to that of Ilona, a young woman whom the protagonist had loved and who killed herself five years earlier. After overcoming his initial befuddlement, the protagonist invites Aino Laine to the opera and then to his home, where he confronts her with the fact that this is the second time that she—or at least her outer form—appears in his life. But for her, too, the events of the day are a repetition: she recounts how one year earlier she was in Paris, where she enjoyed the company of a man who knew that France was about to declare war. After a gap in the narrative, suggesting an erotic interlude, the narrator reveals to her that Hungary will be at war on the following day, too. A phone call interrupts him: he is informed that the declaration of war will be shelved for the time being. As he prepares coffee, he hears her making a phone call in a language that he does not understand, but which seems Slavic. Eventually, they part ways.

¹ While symbolism and decadence, like all art movements, are notoriously nebulous, they have been often defined as diametrically opposed to modernism (not in the least by modernists themselves), with the former representing the values of a civilisation in decline, and modernism representing a desire to 'make it new,' as Ezra Pound famously put it. This opposition hides the fact that these two movements were "mutually constitutive and thoroughly implicated in each other's aesthetic development and textual politics" (Hext and Murray 2; cf. Mahoney and Sherry).

Márai's novel contains many allusions and references to older works of European literature. Many of these can be traced to the *fin de siècle* and the years before the First World War. Márai's longing for a time when death and grief were unique, for instance, is reinforced by an allusion to a short verse from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Das Stunden-Buch* (*Book of Hours*, 1905): "Man muss seinen eigenen Tod haben (People should have a death of their own)" (Márai 47).² Anton Chekhov's play *Чайка* (*The Seagull*, 1895), as Tünde Szabó has shown, plays a significant role in *Sirály*, a fact that is signalled by the novel's title, the symbolism that surrounds Aino Laine, and a narrative style that shares certain features with Chekhov's later prose. From a more impressionistic point of view, one could detect a similarity between the novel's final scene and the final paragraph of James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914). Reflecting on his wife's grief for an old lover, Joyce's protagonist, Gabriel Conroy, turns to the window, "[h]is soul swoon[ing] slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (Joyce 223). Watching Aino Laine disappear into the night, the protagonist of *Sirály* similarly looks out of an open window and sees the snow drift across the night's sky: "As if silence is falling on the sleeping city, the hermetic, soft silence, some unearthly, heavenly silence, thick and white soundlessness (Mintha a csönd hullana az alvó városra, a sűrű, puha csend, valamilyen földöntúli, mennyei csend, vastag és fehér hangtalanság)" (221). In addition to the shared teichoscopy, both stories associate the return of departed lovers with songs. Gabriel Conroy's wife's old lover is briefly revived when at the evening's party one of the guests sings a sorrowful Irish ballad (of Scottish provenance), "The Lass of Aughrim." Likewise, Márai's protagonist is haunted by his lover's repetition of the refrain from an English song by Lord Lyttelton, "Tell me, my Heart, if this be Love?" (Márai 24). Within such a dense network of intertextual allusions to decadence and symbolism, of which these examples are just a sampling, Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* is a natural fit.

In broad strokes, the plot of *Bruges-la-Morte* follows a pattern that is reminiscent of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and that anticipates the

² This quotation seems to be a slightly modified adaptation of "O Herr, gib jedem seinem eignen Tod" (Rilke 82).

events in *Sirály*.³ Rodenbach's story revolves around a widower, Hugues Viane, whose wife passed away five years earlier and who has retreated to the melancholy solitude of Bruges. He has transformed his drawing room into a mausoleum, filled with precious souvenirs that are meant to keep the memory of his wife alive: "He felt that Her touch was everywhere in the intact, unchanging furnishings, sofas, divans, armchairs where she had sat and which preserved the shape, so to speak, of her body" (Rodenbach 27). He is particularly attached to a braid of her hair, which he keeps on display under a glass casket on top of the piano. During his long and solitary walks, he finds her face in the waters of the canals and hears her voice in the song of the bells until, one fateful day, he encounters a woman whose face and gait present a complete likeness. Having discovered that she is an actress, Jane Scott, Viane begins to pay court to her in an obsessive way: "Hugues gave himself up to the intoxicating effects of Jane's resemblance to his dead wife, just as in the past he had rejoiced in the resemblance between the town and himself" (Rodenbach 62). He installs her in a pleasant house and tries to make her conform even more his wife's image, an attempt that ends in disillusion when he has her try on one of his wife's dresses. Taking advantage of Viane's infatuation (or increasingly aggravated by his stalking—the novel gives us only Viane's point of view, as a result of which one can only guess how she is feeling), she insists that she join him at his own home for dinner on the day of the Procession of the Holy Blood. Mocking the photographs of his wife and disturbing the various relics in the drawing room, she picks up the braid of hair and wraps it around her neck; infuriated, Viane strangles her.

From the outline above, it will be apparent that the novels' plots correspond: they revolve around protagonists who are in their forties, who have been in mourning for five years, and who are confronted with women who resemble their beloveds. There are also notable differences, which illustrate how Márai expands on Rodenbach's original and how he measures his difference from his symbolist predecessors. Márai ends the novel in a more uncertain way: mystified by their shared fate, the characters

³ Márai does not allude explicitly to the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, but the classical past would become an interest in his post-war works, such as *Béke Ithakában* (*Peace in Ithaca*, 1952) and *Rómában történt valami* (*Something Has Happened in Rome*, 1971).

part ways in peace. Whereas Viane's obsession turns him into a murderer, Márai's protagonist remains calm and detached, even though at one point he does imagine a scenario that is reminiscent of the ending in *Bruges-la-Morte*: "If she has been sent, if she is playing a part, if tomorrow I have to hand her to the security services, if I have to personally take her by her beautiful white, familiar neck to drown out the redundant words..." (199). The motif of the souvenir, too, is modified. Whereas Hugues Viane arranges his life around memories of the vanished past, including many photographs, Márai's protagonist has kept only one photograph; he even refuses a collection of Ilona's letters, thus avoiding the mistake of choosing an unsuitable transitional object, such as the braid in *Bruges-la-Morte*.⁴ To use Freud's terms, Hugues Viane is a melancholic being, who has failed to accept the reality of loss and whose self-reproach leads to aggression, whereas Márai's protagonist is in mourning, insofar as he can consciously perceive what he has lost. One of the most complex points of contact, which refracts the novel's concern with repetition into a maze of mirrors and on which I would like to expand, is the central place that both texts accord to the opera.⁵

In Rodenbach's novella, Viane falls under the spell of the *Doppelgängerin* during a performance of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (*Robert the Devil*, 1831), which was based on a libretto by Eugène Scribe. Viane has followed Jane Scott into the theatre; since he cannot find her in the auditorium, he assumes that she will appear on stage. She is part of the famous

⁴ Not only do photographs play an important role in the narrative *Bruges-la-Morte*, they also do so in the paratext: the novella includes photographs of the city in its pages. The result is a multimedia form that makes the novella, according to some critics, one of the first instances of a phototextual narrative. Most recent criticism of the novel has focused on this formal aspect; see Blatt, Edwards, Henninger, and Rion. Using ideas from Winnicott's work, Roderick Cooke argues that in his attachment to the braid Hugues Viane failed to choose a suitable transitional object.

⁵ If one were to consider only the bare bones of the plot, then Arthur Schnitzler's *Die Nächste* (1899)—which was consciously modelled on *Bruges-la-Morte*—would have been a more likely source of inspiration for Márai, given his own proficiency in German, his translations of Schnitzler's work, and his affinity with Austro-Hungarian literature. It is, of course, not unlikely that Márai's reading of Schnitzler made him turn to Rodenbach. On Márai as a reader of Schnitzler, see Fried ("Márai lecteur de Casanova et/ou Schnitzler"). On Márai's engagement with Austro-Hungarian literature, see Fried ("Márai and the Literature of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy" and "Das Wien-Bild Sándor Márais").

ballet of the nuns: tempting the opera's eponymous hero, the nuns rise from their graves and throw off their shrouds and habits. Viane is not as resolute as the hero on stage, who resists these advances, but is transported into a different realm: "Hugues felt a shock, like a man coming out of a black dream and into an illuminated ballroom where the light flickers in the teetering balance of his vision" (Rodenbach 46). To Viane, the scene stages his desire, i.e., the return of his wife from the grave. This fantasy involves a grave misunderstanding: readers familiar with the opera know that in this scene the nuns are possessed by a demonic force. As the narrative of the novel plays out, the scene from the opera materializes in real life: Jane Scott torments Viane, even as Viane, who is a devout Catholic, remains in thrall to her.

In *Sirály*, too, a visit to the opera forms a lynchpin in the narrative, but the characters are both spectators, and both maintain a more detached attitude. After their encounter at the ministry, the protagonist invites Aino Laine to the opera, which seems to defuse the tension: "Now they are both liberated, like dancers at a masked ball who laugh at each other at the moment of unveiling (Most mindketten, felszabadultan, nevetni kezdenek, ahogy álarcosbálban nevetnek egymásra a táncosok, a leleplezés pillanatában)" (37–38). The image of the ball resonates with the thoughts of Viane, but the experience that the image conveys is vastly different: while for Viane the idea of the ball conveys a moment of terror, for Márai's characters it is a moment of joy. We find a similar example of repetition with a difference in the subject of the operas. Aino Laine and the protagonist are attending a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* (*The Masked Ball*, first performed in 1859). On the one hand, Márai's choice for this opera can be understood as a metafictional reflection on the way in which his novel imitates Rodenbach's novella: Verdi's opera was based on *Gustave III, ou Le bal masqué* (1833), which was based on a libretto by Eugène Scribe, who also wrote the libretto for *Robert le diable*. In other words, in imitating Rodenbach, Márai suggests that he is imitating Verdi's imitation of Scribe. Furthermore, Márai's novel duplicates Rodenbach's stratagem of letting the opera echo the action of the novel. *Un ballo in maschera* revolves around secrets and hidden identities, which is a major concern of the novel. Like the page boy Oscar, who knows the king's disguise, the protagonist of *Sirály* is one of the few who knows that war is about to be declared: "Oscar knows, but he does not tell (Oszkár tudja, de

nem mondja)" (100). He, too, will eventually reveal his secret. The action of the opera also returns in one of the novel's subplots. At the centre of the opera there is a love triangle between the king, his trusted adviser, and his adviser's wife; believing the king to have had an affair with his wife, the adviser kills him. *Sirály* duplicates the literary device of the love triangle: in his love for Ilona, the protagonist was vying with one of her professors, who, according to her father, bewitched her and bound her to him, like an infectious disease (Márai 63).⁶

If we move from the level of description to that of interpretation, we might wonder what shades of meaning are added by the reference to Verdi. In this regard, the opera's political subtext is significant. *Un ballo in maschera* originally revolved around the 1792 assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden but was revised multiple times to meet the demands of censors in Naples and Rome, with the action being moved from Stockholm to Boston. These changes must be seen in the context of the Risorgimento, or the struggle for the unification of Italy. The Risorgimento was a watershed moment in nineteenth-century history, prompting many advocates of realist schools of thought to recognize the impact of a liberal approach to European geopolitics.⁷ While the plot of Verdi's opera is melodramatic and concerned with love, it is inseparable from its political context, despite the censors' efforts. In *Sirály*, too, what may seem (and what publishers often market) as a love story is a tale in which espionage and the matter of war occupy an arguably much more important role. The protagonist has been charged with writing a declaration of war, after all, while the Finnish girl seems to be a secret agent.

The characters themselves seem to be receptive to the opera's subtext and to use it as a mirror for the present time. The performance prompts Aino Laine to reflect on the bombing of Helsinki. "Is this what you were thinking about this evening, in the opera? (Erre gondolt ma este, az operában?)" (114),

⁶ On triangular desire in Márai's work, see Bollobás.

⁷ For recent accounts of the impact of the Risorgimento on nineteenth-century geopolitics, see Bayly and Biagini and Isabella. On Verdi's views on the Risorgimento, see Gossett. Some thinkers have argued that the opposition between realist and liberal approaches to international relations remains alive today, as the conflict in Ukraine illustrates (e.g. Mearsheimer).

the protagonist asks her. In an uncanny monologue, she describes how her family's house collapsed as they were hiding in the basement. After three weeks of bombing, and after the third bombing of the day, she has become attuned to the noise and to expect the inevitable. When spiders begin to crawl up the white walls and her old dog, Castor, begins to howl, she knows that the fateful moment has come:

Don't think this noise is very loud. One has heard the hoarse thunder of anti-aircraft guns for half an hour, so close, as if each gun is firing in the basement. And then there will be silence at once. There will be a moment of silence, such a silence ... no, this cannot be said or learned from postcards or the cinema. This silence must be heard, once in a lifetime, when the parental house collapses over one's head. Is this minute terrifying? I don't know ... Not really. It is quite different from anything that one has ever imagined or known. It's like birth or death, something that only happens once in a person's life ... Do you understand? (107)⁸

In this passage, Márai gives a subtle and insightful description of the kind of trauma instilled by the experience of bombing. As Paul Saint-Amour has recently shown, the practice of bombing that escalated during the First World War occasioned a transformation in the experience of time. In traditional accounts, such as Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) trauma was associated with belatedness: traumatic symptoms were thought to emerge from the reactivation of latent experiences of unprecedented violence (Bond and Craps 24–27). Saint-Amour argues, however, that the interwar period witnessed the emergence of traumatic experiences that were not retrospective but proleptic. The return

⁸ “Ne higgye, hogy nagyon hangos ez a zöreje. Az ember már fél órája hallja a lég-elhárító ágyúk rekedt kiabálását, oly közletről, mintha minden egyes ágyú ott ropogna a pincében. S aztán egyszerre csend lesz. Egy pillanatra csend lesz, olyan csend... nem, ezt nem lehet elmondani, sem megismerni a képeslapokból vagy a moziból. Ezt a csendet hallani kell, egyszer az életben, mikor az ember feje fölött összedül [sic] a szülői ház. Félelmes ez a perc? Nem tudom... Nem is félelmes. Egészen más, mint minden, amit az ember valaha képzelt vagy megismert. Olyan, mint a születés lehet vagy a halál, valami, ami csak egyszer van az ember életében... érti?”

of shellshocked soldiers to their home countries, reports about the practice of bombing in the colonial peripheries, and the practice of air-raid alerts turned “cities and towns into spaces of rending anticipation”: “in the immediate wake of the First World War, the dread of another massive conflict saturated the Anglo-European imagination, amounting to a proleptic mass traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe” (Saint-Amour 7–8). Aino Laine’s description highlights this double-barrelled dynamic: on the one hand, the experience of bombing is described as a routine, an event to which one gets adjusted, while on the other hand she points out that the destruction of one’s house is a singular and incommensurable event, like birth or death. As such, she is giving the protagonist an inkling of what—so he knows—is to come. Budapest is to become a dead city, like Helsinki (and, as the allusions to Rodenbach’s work in the background suggest, like Bruges):

Soon people will be hoarding, eagerly and frantically, old gold and silk stockings—but they will also collect experiences, in a hurry and between two bombings they will devote themselves to stockpile the convulsive excitement that they religiously believe to correspond with experience and love. (71)⁹

Márai’s articulation of this weird sense of anticipation ties in with the novel’s more general concern with time and temporality. In *Sirály*, the present is marked and interrupted by the losses of the past. Figures of the past commingle in the world of the living, just as Márai’s book is haunted by Rodenbach’s: Jane Scott returns as Ilona, Ilona returns as Aino Laine. In trying to understand what is happening and to communicate his astonishment, the protagonist begins by asking her if she has ever been in his rooms before:

⁹ “Most gyűjtenek majd mindent, mohón és eszeveszetten, a tört aranyat és a selyemharisnyákat –, de gyűjtik az élményeket is, sietve, két bombatámadás között iparkodnak tárolni azt a nyavalyatörős izgalmat, melyről szentül hiszik, hogy egyértelmű az élménnyel és a szerelemmel.”

So they listen for a while.

And it was as if the room around them for a moment disappears. It is as if they are listening in the depths of a forest or in the depths of the sea. It is as if the greenish twilight is one of the old, familiar spaces of life, water or memory, a memory that is older than they, who, with slithery fins, float helplessly in this green haze. Indeed, haven't the two of them been together, in that fearful and indifferent coincidence that is life, the whole of appearances and coincidences? Now the room is big and deep like the past. (119–20)¹⁰

This passage presents an exquisite variation on the way in which Márai often formulates “a moral, psychological, social, in one word, human truth, which is confirmed and generalised by the sensuality of a natural (body, seasons, weather etc.) phenomenon or observation” (Varga 29). In the space of one single paragraph, the perspective moves between the fate of two individual humans in a room and the deep time of evolution, as represented by the depth of a forest or the depth of the sea. In short, in *Sirály* events are marked by prefiguring and fulfilment more than by clock time. Márai was not the only interwar writer to advance such a view on temporality. By portraying the present as a surface in which underlying temporalities break through, Márai is joining a chorus of thinkers (including Heidegger, Bergson, Husserl, Lukács, and Simmel) who sought to rehabilitate the notion of lived, immediate experience, and thus qualified “the perception that modern society, constituted by a combination of capitalism and technology, was increasingly being directed by quantitative and objective forms of measurement and the regime of calendar and clock time” (Harootunian 479).

This notion of the present as weighted with sediments has political implications. As Benedict Anderson has argued, building on Walter Benjamin's

¹⁰ “Így hallgatnak egy ideig. / S mintha eltűnne körülöttük a szoba egy pillanatra. Mintha egy erdő mélyén vagy a tenger mélységeiben hallgatnának. Mintha a zöldes félhomály az élet egyik régi, ismerős térfogata lenne, víz vagy emlékezés... s emlékek, melyek régibbek, mint ők, olajos-súlyos uszonyokkal, nesztelenül úsznak ebben a zöld homályban. Csakugyan, együtt voltak már ők, ketten, abban a félelmes és közömbös véletlenben, ami az élet, a tünemények és esélyek összefüggései? Most nagy és mély a szoba, mint a múlt.”

ideas, the modern, capitalistic notion of time as “homogenous” and “empty” was fundamental to the emergence of the idea of a nation: the nation is an imagined community in which events at different places are connected only because they happen to take place at the same time (Anderson 26). The modern novel was an important catalyst in the articulation of imagined communities. In Anderson's view, it is a technology for “re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (25): through its forms and structures of address, “fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (36). Nationalism is, of course, an important concern in *Sirály*: as a civil servant, the protagonist has been accustomed to the structure of feeling that nation represents. The encounter with Aino Laine, however, prompts him to adopt a wider, cosmopolitan point of view. He dwells on the affinity between the Finnish and the Hungarians as speakers of Uralic languages that do not belong to Indo-European languages; he is particularly intrigued by the fact that Aino Laine's name can be translated as “Egyetlen Hullám” (“Single Wave”). In other words, he imagines themselves as being part of a larger ethnic group that, importantly, does not coincide with the nation. At the same time, he also frequently adopts a European perspective:

The European man was living a life of discontent: with discontent he travelled and walked, listened to music, read books, loved and divorced, within his own European fate, as if he was insulted. Was it not the discontent of the civilised man who sees the barbarians with raised axes throng together in front of the artfully decorated gates? (73–74)¹¹

Here, too, the reader is made to share a vision of a community that transcends the boundaries of the nation–state. This vision is remarkably negative: the common ground that its members share is a form of resentment.

¹¹ “Az európai ember sértődötten élt, utazott, járkált, hallgatott zenét, olvasott könyveket, szeretkezett és szakított kedvesével a maga európai végzetén belül – mintha megsértették volna. A művelt ember sértődöttsége volt ez, aki gyanítja, hogy a barbárok felemelt buzogánnyal ott állanak már a nemesmivű kapuk előtt?”

As the previous paragraphs have suggested, this sense of offence at the state of the world intersects with the condition of proleptic mass traumatization in the era of world wars, as well as with the impossibility of agency in the timeless age of capitalism. One may fault the protagonist here for thinking from a Eurocentric point of view, as the reference to the barbarians suggests, were it not that in the course of the paragraph his perspective shifts to that of the barbarians: “But they, the others, the ‘barbarians’ in front of the gates, were they not offended as well? (De ők, a többiek, a ‘barbárok’ a kapuk előtt, nem voltak-e sértődöttek ők is?)” (74). This note of sympathy for the colonial other suggests that the condition of proleptic mass traumatization and lack of agency is also tangible in parts of the globe that are, literally and figuratively, in different time zones. Towards the end of the novel, for instance, the protagonist poignantly reflects on the way in which ‘European’ resentment is inescapable:

Can anything in life be foreseen, and calculated—not just in your precious life, of course, but in the lives of the two billion people who populate the earth? In the jungle, bombs fall on the heads of unsuspecting natives among the breadfruit, in lands where white men have never visited one day an African or Asian bush begins to burn unexpectedly because a phosphorus grenade has fallen from a stray plane into the deep ... (194)¹²

In its content as well as its style, this passage articulates a form of cosmopolitanism. The protagonist manages to distance himself from his own main cultural affiliations and critically reflects on the precarity of local conditions in the face of globalizing forces. He does so in a passage of free indirect speech, which exemplifies the tone of restless self-reflection that characterizes the book.

¹² “Van-e még számítás, valószínűség az életben – természetesen nemcsak a te becses életedben, hanem két milliárd ember életében, akik benépesítik a földet? A dzsungelben a kenyérfák között esik gyanútlan bennszülöttek fejére a bomba, tájakon, ahol fehér ember nem járt soha, egy nap váratlanul égni kezd az afrikai vagy ázsiai bozót, mert egy foszforos palack pottyant egy kószáló gépről a mélybe.”

This adoption of a cosmopolitan ethos jars with the references to a novel that, in its detailed depictions of a Flemish mediaeval town, is distinctly regional: by translating Rodenbach's story to the capital of Hungary on the eve of a new world war, Márai is transforming a provincial past into the global present.¹³ This contrast in space and time informs the contrast in the kinds of subjectivity that the stories portray. *Bruges-la-Morte* confines itself to the plane of individual consciousness. It is a study of one man's melancholy obsession with Eros and Thanatos; walking in a borderland, Hugues Viane is torn between a 'decadent' desire to see traces of the dead in the physical world of the present and a 'symbolist' faith that there is an otherworldly, spiritual realm from which we are exiled (Stone and Troyanos). The protagonist of *Sirály*, in contrast, is not melancholic but nostalgic: he conforms to Svetlana Boym's analysis of the nostalgic as one concerned with "the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (Boym xvi). Such a diagnosis may clarify his fatalism. Márai's protagonist believes that violence can be held at bay, but only for a limited amount of time:

I want to do everything to keep my country free from the powers that in that memorable night destroyed the beautiful house in Helsinki where you were a child. This is my task. Every day and every week that we can postpone this fate is a great gift, and without regard to the art of phrasing, which is my profession, or precisely by using it, do I want to fulfil that other duty of mine, so that the houses where people live whose fate is bound to mine, may remain in place, together with everything that their walls hide. (187)¹⁴

While the tone of this passage is pessimistic, the protagonist does take responsibility: despite his misgivings about the homogenizing impact of

¹³ For recent revaluations of modernist cosmopolitanism and modernism in a global context, see Bru et al., Berman, Lyon, Kalliney, and Walkowitz.

¹⁴ "S mindent el akarok követni, hogy távol tartsam hazámtól az erőket, melyek lerombolták az emlékezetes éjszakán a szép házat, Helsinkiben, ahol gyerek voltál. Ez a dolgom. Minden nap, minden hét, amellyel odázni tudjuk ezt a sorsot, nagy ajándék, s a fogalmazáson túl, ami mesterségem vagy annak segítségével, teljesíteni akarom ezt a másik kötelességemet: hogy a házak, ahol emberek laknak, akiknek sorsa közös az enyémmel, megmaradjanak helyükön, mindennel, amit a falak rejtegetnek."

the forces of modernity, he cares enough about the world as it is to ward off the fate that awaits it. As such, his nostalgia is not what Boym would call restorative: he does not argue that we must rebuild the lost homeland of the nation by reviving (or inventing) its vanishing traditions. Instead, his nostalgia is reflective: as the various passages that I have cited illustrate, he is not so much concerned with the truth of his lover's reappearance but uses it as an occasion to linger "on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym 41). In combination with the cosmopolitan stance that the novel adopts, the nostalgic ethos with which it is suffused adds some colour to the 'austere fatalism' that Márai expresses in his non-fiction writings.¹⁵ For the protagonist, the prospect of total destruction is not frightening: he ponders that "it is almost reassuring (s ez csaknem megnyugtató)" (74). Instead of looking to the future, the protagonist looks sideways: he aims to find a common ground in the fact that we all partake in the search for a sense of continuity in a fragmented world. Such a view of the condition of Europe may not provide a roadmap to a new future, but it has the benefit of being clear-sighted. At the moment of writing, in March 2022, the cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv are subjected to indiscriminate bombing, thus being made to share in the same fate as Aleppo and Palmyra in the previous decade, or Budapest and Helsinki eighty years ago. One can see why, in the face of such wanton devastation, a voice that cautions us against the illusion of progress exerts a certain appeal; at the very least, it prepares us for the catastrophe that is to come.

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¹⁵ The distinction between fiction and non-fiction in Márai's work is a complex one (cf. Mekis).

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