

Márai, Sándor. 2013. *The Withering World* (trans. John M. Ridland and Peter V. Czipott). Richmond, Surrey, UK: Alma Books. 242 pp.

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For the longest time in the United States the only Hungarian name that ever came up in literary discourse was Ferenc Molnár, whose boulevard comedies were a staple on Broadway stages in the 1920s and 1930s and even made their way into films. In the past decade or two finally another Hungarian writer has broken into the English language book market, although in his case only posthumously: Sándor Márai (1900-1989), whose novels were published one after the other, prompted by the great critical acclaim he had received in Europe after his death. The success of these two writers abroad would require the psychoanalysis of the book industry since neither is from the mainstream of twentieth century Hungarian literature. Yet even Imre Kertész, the sole Nobel Prize winning Hungarian writer, has received less attention and popular acceptance than Márai. And now we have a bilingual edition of Márai's generously selected poems in an annotated and beautifully produced volume from a well-known British publishing house and supported by grants from various Hungarian and British government agencies, a distinction very few other Hungarian poets have ever enjoyed.

This publication was no doubt facilitated by the success of Márai's novels, but what was it in the novels that appealed to contemporary readers? Could it be nostalgia for Central European mid-twentieth century sensibilities? Or for European culture before it was deconstructed and, supposedly, revealed to be an instrument of colonial oppression? Or for a time when it was enough to want to understand one's surroundings and it was not required to be clever? For a time when it was easy to tell the good guys from the bad? For a time when humanism was not a competitive sport and one could be a humanist without denigrating others who aspired to the same ideal by a different route and/or were buffeted by the same uncontrollable historical forces? For the time of Thomas Mann, Jean-Paul Sartre, T.S. Eliot, Bertram Russell, et. al? Indeed, Márai's prose resonates with that era, and now that I have read this large selection of his poems -- and not only the later, longer occasional ones -- I must concede that this poet has been unjustly neglected even among Hungarian litterateurs; he definitely belongs in the halcyon of twentieth century Hungarian poetry, together with Attila József (1905-1937), Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944), Deszö Kosztolányi (1885-1936), etc.; the omission of Endre Ady (1887-1919) is intentional: his symbolist style is more emblematic of the fin-du-siecle transitional period than of the twentieth century.

Márai shares the voice of the hurt-abandoned child (a tone set and legitimized by Kosztolányi's poetry volumes *The Complaints of a Helpless Little Child* ['A szegény kisgyermek panaszai,' 1910] and *The Complaints of a Sad Man* ['A bús férfi panaszai,' 1924]) and his contemporaries, who lost their secure moorings in a war-torn, convulsing world but still derived strength from their solid intellectual grounding and their faith in the redemptive power of civilization. Thus Márai rises above mere personal concerns by embodying universal elements into his otherwise very private poetry. Added to this extension of voice and concerns are the



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modernist influence of the time, unexpected turns of language, surprising juxtapositions of images, and metaphors of almost Dadaist dislocation. The result of all these is a life realized in poetry, but not quite: there is one more thing, and that is the formal style that adds more than just a finishing touch to his poems and serves as a framework and backbone for the poet to keep his exuberant flow of lines together. Free verse has become an essential part of modern poetry in the West, and initially a few Hungarian poets, like Milán Füst (1888-1967) and Lajos Kassák (1887-1867), enthusiastically embraced it, too, while others not so much rejected it as simply found no new freedom in it.

Hungarian is a highly inflected language that on the one hand allows for a great variety of rhymes and easy ways to create formal verse, but on the other all this results in long words, which, when piled into long lines, can sound rather awkward, not to say prosaic. In fact, I feel that effective free verse in Hungarian can be best achieved by using short declarative sentences or sentence fragments. A good example of this approach is from one of Márai's relatively late poems, "Amen" ['*Amen*']:

The Dead! Fog! The sea in autumn!
The way that she would lift her hand!
The taste of her tears! Wound on my mouth!
Oh, amen, amen, amen, amen!

[*Halottak! Köd! A tenger ősszel!
A mód, ahogy kezét emelte!
Könnyének ize! Seb a számon!
Ó, ámen, ámen, ámen, ámen!*] (162-163).

Early in his career Márai too came under the spell of Western European free verse and used it well in "Hungarians" ['*Magyar emberek*']:

Their death has something of the wild beasts' haughty reticence
And French Legion sergeants and German neurologists
Have trouble, of course, understanding how they can overlook pain.
Every one of them burns a little – they're fire hazards – and they rarely leave
letters behind.

[*A halálukban van valami a vadállatok gőgös szemérméből
És ahogy elnéznek a fájdalom fölött, azt nehezen értik meg persze
A francia légió őrmesterei, vagy német ideg orvosok.
Mindegyik ég egy kissé és tűzveszélyesek és levelet ritkán hagynak maguk után.*] (66-67)

In "Boulevard" he even ventured into prose poems with metaphors that he never used in his novels and which would have made purple prose in a straightforward prose work, but as poetry they evoke the spirit of urban life in the 1920s and 1930s, thus creating a wonderful, almost sinfully exciting noir ambiance. For example:

I'm a man loitering aimlessly on street corners, I'm a silk curtain over the trysting alcove and welling emotion in women's clutch purses, I'm the tire on automobiles and the chauffeur's sick heart, I'm smoke, I came and I pass, they trample me and I'm the dying jewellery in the bank's stuffy safe.

[*Ember vagyok, utcasarkokon ténfergek céltalanul, selyemfüggöny vagyok a találkahelyeken és érzékenyülés a nők retiküljében, autok kereke vagyok és a sofőr beteg szive, füst vagyok, jöttem és elmúlok, letaposnak és haldokló ékszer vagyok a bankok fulladt széfjeiben.*] (80-81).

From the very beginning, though, Márai was committed to a formal style which became dominant in the second half of his poetry writing career, at least as far as rhyme was concerned, even in poems that otherwise sound like free verse with their meter rather variable in the long lines. In addition to offering a wide choice of rhyme pairs, the Hungarian language is perhaps uniquely suited to formal poetry; the rhyme pattern, the meter, and the limited syllable count keep those five- or six-syllable words from bumping into one another; the form gives these long words order in which, instead of looking and sounding awkward, they function as finely-chiseled granite blocks. Thus they are like monuments, somewhat reminiscent of the gravitas of Latin verse, and instead of cramping the message, the form forces or helps the poet to channel the message and keep things from becoming an endless ramble. Hungarian poetry is often socially and politically engaged, and often it is the form that keeps it from degenerating into a diatribe. Even an extremely private poet as Márai was compelled by cataclysmic historical events to step out of his mental ivory tower and face the real world around him.

Central Europe in the twentieth century was cursed with one tragedy after another, and Márai's formative years coincided with WWI and the revolutions that followed. His upper-middleclass background provided him with a sheltered existence and an education that qualified him as a journalist in Germany and France. In addition, he had already published two volumes of poetry in Hungarian by the age of twenty, and he chose that language as his literary tool as he went on to write several novels and plays back in Hungary in addition to his journalist work abroad. His books did well even in translation, and life was good to him until 1944-1945, the last year of the war, when he had to hide his Jewish wife Ilona Matzner and then finally witness the destruction of Budapest, where up to then things had been relatively peaceful. The apocalypse is fully and dramatically recorded in a set of seventy-one half sonnets plus a longer epilog titled *The Book of Verses* (*Verses könyv*. Révai könyvkiadó, 1945), in which the surrealist metaphors and the petty problems of a sensitive soul are gone. By now the whining of the spoiled inner child has turned into the howls of the adult caught in a catastrophe in all its stark reality. This was when Márai, already past the age of forty, found his authentic poetic voice which was later further nurtured by one tragedy after another, the most profound being his exile from his homeland and language in 1948, when the communist dictatorship was fully established politically and economically and extended its total control over every aspect of life including the arts and letters.

Exile did not seem to agree with Márai. Although he did not have to languish in D.P. (Displaced Persons) camps or make a living by doing menial jobs as did many other intellectuals of lesser standing, still, his income from Radio Free Europe did not make him financially independent, and his existential problems only increased with time. Living abroad with money in

his pocket in the 1920s seemed to have been a liberating and exhilarating experience, but the postwar world was less congenial to the foreign and penniless writer. Worse yet, he was by then too old to adjust to a new and alien environment, let alone assimilate. By then he was in a foreign landscape not as a tourist just passing through but as a refugee with no other place to go. Life around him in the outside world was no longer a curiosity to observe and elucidate but something to grapple with. A crisis of the spirit ensued, but he dealt with it in some of his best poems, in Jeremiads of *de profundis* mode; at least two of these poems have since become monumental milestones in Hungarian literature: "Funeral Oration" [*Halotti beszéd*] and "Angel from Heaven" [*Mennyből az angyal*]. Written in 1950 in a loosely constructed style, almost free verse except for the rhymes, the former is based on the earliest extant written Hungarian text, a funeral oration, combined with a large number of other quotes from poems of patriotic exhortation that sadly contrast with Márai's real-life dispiriting reality of homeless refugee status. The literary references make this poem essentially untranslatable without numerous historical and textual notes, which the translation team helpfully and unobtrusively supplies at the end of the book.

The latter poem, inspired by a Hungarian Christmas carol, is also a funeral oration over the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising against the Soviet communist rule. In this poem there are no obscure historical allusions, and formal verse readily lends itself to celebratory or memorial recitation while testing the skill of the potential translator:

Tell them this wonder of the world,
The Christmas tree of poor folk snarled
In Silent Nights began to burn;
Now many cross themselves and turn
Around the world, to stare and stare;
Some comprehend, some unaware
Shake heads: for many it's too much.
They pray, repulsed at what they watch:
Not candy canes hung from this tree
But the Nations' Christ, sad Hungary.

[*Mondd el, mert ez világ csodája:
Egy szegény nép karácsonyfája
A Csendes Éjben égni kezdett –
És sokan vetnek most keresztet.
Földrészek népe nézi, nézi,
Egyik érti, másik nem érti.
Fejük csóválják, sok ez, soknak.
Imádkoznak vagy iszonyodnak,
Mert más lóg a fán, nem cukorkák:
Népek Krisztusa, Magyarország.] (180-181)*

My favorite poem from that time period is probably more typical of Márai's ironic tone and resignation: "The Dolphin Looked Back" [*A delfin visszanézett*]. The translation in this poem very cleverly handles a play on the word "passport."

I wanted to go home, but it was already nightfall.
And I had no passport. There was no port. No pass. Nothing at all.

[*Haza akartam menni, de már este volt.*
És nem volt útle vél. Nem volt út. Se levél. Semmi se volt.] (170-171)

There are many more delights to be found in *The Withering World* that seem to be based on an original selection, e.g., "The Dolphin Looked Back" [*A delfin visszanézett*], previously published by an émigré publishing house in the 1970s, while the poet was still alive and presumably active in the editorial process. The volume at hand has a foreword by Tibor Fischer, the notable British author of Hungarian descent who provides a helpful assessment of the poet. In addition, in the back of the book the translators sketch Márai's biography and the historical background of his life. Moreover, they let the reader in on their tricks of the trade and how they collaborated on the translation. Everything is here to help even those who never heard of Márai or Hungary to appreciate these poems.

So far we have discussed the unquestionable quality of the original Márai poems and the attention they deserve, but how about the translation? Isn't poetry in translation all about the translation? Yes and no. Ideally the translation should not even be noticed as such, it should be taken for granted, the reader should be given poetic lines that mimic the original and convey the same meaning, that is, reflect the intentions and the creativity of the poet. Mimic the original, but what if the original is modern poetry in formal verse? That is not done in English, is it? Again the answer is yes and no. Luckily I have translated Sándor Kányádi, a living Hungarian poet, the most prominent one now; I am able to consult him in my work, and we have had extensive discussions about the art of translation. When I explained to him that the *aabb* rhyme pattern sounds like machinegun fire in English, or else like a joke or rap music, he said, Thin out the rhymes, follow a looser *abcb* rhyme scheme, or skip it altogether, but try to keep the beat. It is the beat that gives a poetic line the effortless, natural flow, enabling it to go on and on, and ultimately produce the music that used to accompany all forms of poetry. I wish the translators of this volume had followed the same principle and cut the number of rhymes in half.

To this reader, in some of the poems it seemed that the translators' effort to be faithful to form was more earnest than successful; there are too many lines that bear the marks of the struggle to reproduce the form rather than the easy flow of the original. It would be ungracious if not unjust of us to take the hard-working translators on a nitpicking expedition, but as it happens they point out at least one example of a forced rhyme which was achieved by tacking on an extra word at the end of the line in their translation of "Funeral Oration" [*Halotti beszéd*]:

And Estonian, Lithuanian and Rumanian. Now shut up and pay.
In the end, che sarà, sarà. The Aztecs too vanished away.

[*És ész t voltál, litván, román... Most halgass és fizess.*
Elmúltak az asztékok is. Majd csak lesz, ami lesz.] (176-177)

In their Translators' Note about the above lines Ridland and Czipott admit that "...at the risk of a slight redundancy, [we] finished the couplet with a strong long-vowelled rhyme" (238). In plain

English, they seem to have been rhyme-driven. A redundant and adverbial word like "away" (one that is used with disturbing frequency in this book) cannot possibly make a strong rhyme; rather, it mars the whole line, if not the whole poem. A rhyme tacked on with an extra word is like a dead tree fallen into a stream; it causes eddies to form around it instead of helping to speed the flow. Too bad Ridland and Czipott did not start their work while Márai was still around; I am sure he would have given the translators special dispensation from strict adherence to the rhyme scheme, and yet crossed out that infelicitous Italian phrase ("Che sarà, sarà") that Doris Day made popular in a Hitchcock film some seven years after the date of the poem. Imagine Márai, noted for his elegantly chiseled poetry, "borrowing" from pop culture! Often translators of formal poetry fall into the trap of resorting to nineteenth century language constructions, but Ridland and Czipott here err in the opposite direction, of relying too heavily on anachronistically mid-twentieth century popular slang and clichés. A cliché, whether new or old, is still a cliché. Notwithstanding this flaw, the other quoted examples in this review show the translation team at their best. Overall, their translation was a very ambitious and worthwhile undertaking that should generate more interest in Hungarian literature, particularly poetry.