

Tóth, Miklós Bálint. *Az ideológiától a nosztalgiáig. Barangolások Koestlerrel és Máraival* [From Ideology to Nostalgia. Excursions with Arthur Koestler and Sándor Márai. Translated by Ákos Farkas]. Budapest: MCC Press. 2023. 246 pp.

Reviewed by Zsolt Czigányik¹, Gerda Henkel fellow at CEU's Democracy Institute

Miklós Bálint Tóth's book is a most interesting inquiry into the potential role of fictional and imaginative literature in the study of politics, with case studies of three novels – Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Sándor Márai's *Judgement in Canudos* (*Ítélet Canudosban*, 1970), and *Szindbád Goes Home* (*Szindbád hazamegy*, 1940). Despite his young age, Tóth may be known to the public as his papers have appeared in prestigious journals addressing topics of political science, public policy, and the political theoretical aspects of disability. His current volume is the book version of his PhD dissertation, which he defended at Corvinus University in Budapest in 2022.

Tóth's investigation focuses on the value of imaginary literature in the understanding of political phenomena, claiming that political science (primarily political theory) can benefit from studying fictional literature, particularly novels. Such inquiries are especially relevant if the quantitative focus of social sciences opens the way for more qualitative research to explore the complexities of political life. Tóth rightly states that in the 20th century, the methods of natural sciences became determinative for the social sciences as well – this may be the chief reason why the study of the relationship of literature and politics has been under-researched so far. However, the re-humanisation of the social sciences is a growing trend (in Hungary, Zoltán Gábor Szűcs-Zágoni and Csaba Tóth have been publishing on this topic), and Miklós Bálint Tóth's book fits into this trend very well. He reflects basically on all significant international contributions to this area of research (esp. Baumeister, Horton, and Whitebrook), convincingly arguing that the cooperation of literary studies and political science is valuable and necessary; therefore, his *From Ideology to Nostalgia* is a welcome addition to this field.

The book begins with a thorough methodological introduction. Tóth bases his methods of analysis essentially on classical New Criticism. At the same time, he is cautious with more recent, especially postmodern theories, such as intertextuality, though relevant critics with a contextual approach (e.g., Martha Nussbaum) are also considered. Tóth's argumentation is logical, and his writing is fruitful for both scholars and lay readers. The various approaches toward the relationship between politics and literature are discussed through several good

¹ cziganyik.zsolt@btk.elte.hu



examples, and this discussion reflects a thorough knowledge of both literary and political theory. He reflects on the limitations of the biographical study of literature (where the biography of the author is the main guideline to the interpretation of the text) or the use of literary fiction as an illustration of political phenomena. More than these, literary works may also offer an insight into contemporary social reality, and literature may also become a vehicle of social and political philosophy. The methodological introduction already anticipates the analytical chapters that are presented as case studies. As all these studies reflect on 20th-century prose fiction, the methodology is tuned to such kinds of literature. It may merit mention that different genres (esp. drama or poetry) and different eras may require diverse methodologies. This issue is probably the only weakness of the introductory chapters: a more detailed differentiation may be beneficial, as the text sometimes refers to 'literature' in a most general manner. It is also acknowledged that utopian and dystopian literature are significant fields in the political application of literary texts, as these works are often interpreted with regard to their liminal position in the intersection of imaginary literature and political (or social) philosophy. Fictionality is also a significant issue, being a regular pretext for the dismissal of literary texts by social scientists. Tóth, however, observes that "the overwhelming majority of human interactions are not strictly speaking tangible, but are only explicable in the context of our communal existence ... Scholars who dismiss literary works because of their fictionality ignore the fact that the most important texts in the social-science canon ... often resort to metaphors and other figures of speech to describe the social phenomena they set out to interpret."²

The case study chapters are valuable political analyses of significant writings – the first chapter focuses on Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*,³ while the following chapters discuss books by Sándor Márai. At the beginning of the Koestler study, we learn of a new aspect of the author's approach; that a great value in studying literary texts lies in their ability to offer an *internal* view of the characters, and hence a more personal aspect of politics. In this chapter the focus is on the anatomy of ideological thinking, which, in its extreme form "cannot properly be called a mentality, as it fails to meet the basic criteria of searching for meaning",⁴ it becomes "an erroneous and pathological form of political thought ... a mental disposition in which the complexities of the political and moral reality are ignored so that a well-defined vision is imposed, while every other value or goal is branded as illegitimate or at least irrelevant."⁵ The rich analysis (that has a political-psychological focus, but it extends to the study of language and the theological aspects of ideology-driven thinking) demonstrates the value of imaginative literature for political studies in its insights.

Chapter 4 gives a well-balanced study reflecting on Canudos, a quasi-utopian settlement in Brazil, as it appears in Sándor Márai's 1970 novel, *Ítélet Canudosban* (Judgement in Canudos). This thorough analysis continues the high level of the Koestler chapter. One of the highlights of this chapter is the emphasis on how Márai's text reflects the value of how

² Quotations from the book are taken from the English version: *From Ideology to Nostalgia. Excursions with Arthur Koestler and Sándor Márai*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2025. Translated by Ákos Farkas. Tóth 23.

³ Credit must be given to the translator for using Boehm's 2019 translation of the newly discovered German text originally written by the Hungarian-born Koestler.

⁴ Tóth 37.

⁵ Tóth 35.

"democracy [is] lifted out of the fog of false beliefs and myths, and posits it as a civilizing method which, with its well-defined system of principles, leads societies based on a set of coarse, almost beastly, social interactions towards the next stage of development."⁶ Canudos, a place where keys and locks are unnecessary, is defined by the tension between order and anarchy and represents an eternal longing that will gain another relevance in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 continues the textual analyses with Márai, this time reflecting on the novel *Szindbád hazamegy* (Sinbad Goes Home), offering an analysis of nostalgia as a political concept. Unlike ideology, nostalgia is not a central focus in most political inquiries, making Tóth's approach somewhat novel. A most valuable source here is Svetlana Boym; the analysis remains rich and precise, though it does not reflect how nostalgia tends to be a form of selective memory, ignoring negative aspects of the past, in this case, particularly that of poverty. The analysis of Márai's text reveals a powerful political attitude that defies modernity's notion of progress, and "has a peculiarly democratic side to it, as the opportunity is given to everyone to identify their own or their community's past as a golden age in comparison with the present."⁷ And even though nostalgia is usually related to inactivity or a displacement activity, Tóth's analysis of Márai's novel convincingly argues for the power of such an attitude.

The choice of the objects of investigation in the case studies is interesting. Arthur Koestler is an almost obvious choice; on the other hand, Sándor Márai reflects more the author's interest than the structural requirements of the topic. George Orwell or Ursula Le Guin may have been more natural choices (Orwell is mentioned, though not analysed). On the other hand, it is a welcome change that the Anglophone focus of the topic is widened, and the studies prove that Márai is a good choice as a rich source of political understanding.

The conclusion states that the book is intended for students of political theory – one may add that it includes valuable insights also for students of literature and literary scholars, or anyone interested in both literature and politics. Miklós Bálint Tóth wrote a significant book, which is an important contribution to the field of the study of literature with a focus on politics. This field is growing, and *From Ideology to Nostalgia*, with its balanced analyses, insightful studies, and logical argumentations, demonstrates what benefit is drawn if a social scientist takes fiction seriously.

⁶ Tóth 83.

⁷ Tóth 98.