Title of dissertation: The way to Canudos. Different approaches to Sándor Márai’s novel
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Topic of the dissertation: an analysis of Sándor Márai’s novel Ítélet Canudosban (Judgement at Canudos) by taking into consideration the circumstances of its creation and reception, in comparison with its source (Euclides da Cunha: Rebellion in the Backlands [Os Sertões]) and Mario Vargas Llosa’s work on the same topic (The War of the End of the World).

The aims of the dissertation: Judgement at Canudos is a particular work from the point of view of both its authors’s oeuvre and its afterlife. Márai’s novel was published in 1970 in Toronto more than twenty years after he had fled Hungary. During this period Márai had published only two novels (Béke Ithakában [Peace in Ithaca] and San Gennaro vére [San Gennaro’s Blood]), which is very few in comparison with the abundance of the twenty years preceding the writer’s exile (more than forty books amongst which seventeen novels). A parallel can be drawn between this situation and the creation of Judgement at Canudos as more than ten years passed between the first diary note mentioning the Brazilian book used as source material and the note reporting the completion of the novel (1958 and 1969). Such a long and difficult creative process had not been typical of Márai before the exile. In this dissertation I have tried to identify the reasons for the author’s diminishing activity (to what extent was it due to the exile?) and I have also been interested in the changes in Márai’s prose that could be justified by the writer’s new situation.

The novel’s reception has also been very interesting. Judgement at Canudos is not one of the author’s popular books, it is hardly known to the readers. This can be partly explained by the fact that although the publication of Márai’s oeuvre had started in 1990, Judgement at Canudos was published as an independent work only in 2008. In 2002 it had already come out as part of Történelmi regények (Historical Novels), but this edition containing four novels did not manage to draw the public’s attention to the individual works. This lack of recognition is
reflected by the rarity of foreign language editions. Although the international success of Márai’s work can be measured by the growing number of translations, *Judgement at Canudos* has only been translated into Portuguese. But the attitude of literary criticism to the novel is even more thought-provoking. Interpreters of Márai’s oeuvre differ tremendously in their views on the novel, some consider it a masterpiece, while others regard it as a failure. My dissertation has tried to draw on this debate while developing a personal point of view.

One of the main goals has been the analysis of Márai’s source of inspiration, *Rebellion in the Backlands* (examined in French translation), which has been intended mainly to determine to what extent the author had built his work on the facts presented by the Brazilian novel. The chapter immediately preceding the detailed study of Márai’s novel deals with the comparison with the other Canudos book, Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The War of the End of the World*. This comparison has given me insights into how two great writers dealt with the same topic independently of one another.

**The subject matter of the dissertation; the method of treatment:** chapter 1 of the dissertation gives an overview of the period of exile spent by the author until the publication of *Judgement in Canudos* (1948-1970). Starting out from the *Diary* and the two novels written during this period (*Peace in Ithaca* and *San Gennaro’s Blood*), I have tried to find out in what way the leaving of Hungarian speaking environment affected Márai’s creative psychology and the prosepoetics of his works. I have compared these works to novels written in Hungary in the 1940s and tried to highlight not only differences but also connections that have led me to reveal a system of major relationships in Márai’s oeuvre. My method has been primarily based on the comparison of the characteristics of the novels written in the 40s and the exile period and pieces of information gathered in the *Diary*.

In chapter 2 I have examined the creative process of *Judgement at Canudos* by studying the manuscript of the writer’s *Diary* that gives detailed information on this long creative process. I have searched the manuscripts from 1958, date of the earliest note on da Cunha’s work, to September 1969, date of the note reporting on the completion of the novel.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of the reception of the novel from the earliest reviews published in Hungarian literary magazines in Western Europe and North America to essays and extracts of monographs published in Hungary after the change in regime. The study has been completed by the analysis of the Brazilian reviews on the only foreign edition of the novel. It has been very interesting to experience the different manifestations of the personal involvement of the contemporary emigrant medium, the division of Hungarian literary
criticism regarding the quality of the novel and the particular criteria of Brazilian reviewers judging Márai’s book from the point of view of their native country.

In chapter 4 the presentation of Euclides da Cunha’s *Rebellion in the Backlands* is followed by a comparison with *Judgement at Canudos* which has been intended to find out to what extent the Brazilian novel had influenced Márai’s work. I have examined all the characters, events, motives and even the foreign words apparently related to the Brazilian environment, and have compared them to da Cunha’s text.

I have followed the same method in chapter 5 while comparing *Judgement at Canudos* to Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel, *The War of the End of the World*. Their common source, da Cunha’s work has made it possible for me to collate the two novels character by character and motive by motive.

In chapter 6 I have tried to interpret *Judgement at Canudos*, which has lead me from the problem of determining the genre, through the interpretation of the title and the analysis of the characters and the structure of the novel, to the question of an aesthetic approach to Márai’s work.

**The conclusions of the dissertation:** the changes that we notice when comparing the works written in the exile period to the earlier ones cannot be explained merely by the changes that occured in the author’s life in spite of their influence on Márai’s work. After he had completed *Sértődöttek* (The Offended), Márai seemed to have understood that he had reached the end of something (a genre, a stylistic period) and the works written in exile reflect both the influence of the new conditions and a creative intent aiming at conscious change. From this point of view, the myth parody of *Peace in Ithaca* represents a peculiar tone, the eclecticism of *San Gennaro’s Blood* is unprecedented in Márai’s oeuvre, and the extreme purity of the prose of *Judgement at Canudos* is also a new feature in the Hungarian writer’s work. The author’s prose had become much simpler in comparison with the occasionally mannered style characteristic of the 40s. Of course, the new creative situation had caused a loss of assertiveness as it is shown by the length of the creative process of *Judgement at Canudos*. We should not forget, however, that the novel I have examined can also be connected to certain works created before the author’s exile (e.g. *Válás Budán* [Divorce in Buda] or *Esther's Inheritance*) and this fact underlines the coherence of Márai’s oeuvre.

Although in the notes of *Judgement at Canudos* Márai points out that he borrowed only topographic and chronological data and a few personal names from da Cunha’s work, the analysis has shown that he used much more elements and motives taken from *Rebellion in the
Backlands. Even if it is true that the novel is essentially fiction, the section presenting Canudos was undoubtedly based on the reality inspired by the Brazilian book.

The main question of the reception of the novel, that is, whether Márai’s work should be considered a masterpiece or a failure, illustrates perfectly the subjectivity of the reception of a literary work. In my opinion Judgement at Canudos is a major novel despite the deficiencies the critical reader might discover in certain passages. These „deficiencies” originate partly from a writer’s attitude that makes Márai so different from Vargas Llosa. The personal creative presence of the Hungarian author can be felt in most parts of his work, while the Peruvian writer, true to the Flaubertian ideal, tries to realize perfect authorial impersonality.

The comparison of Vargas Llosa’s and Márai’s novel has also proven to be instructive from the point of view of the differences between authors’ attitudes. The author of The War of the End of the World wanted to tell a story in the most colourful and authentic manner, while the war at Canudos was mainly an occasion for Márai to write about the discrepancy between state and anarchy, order and sytem. Nevertheless, I do not consider Judgement at Canudos simply a historical parable, as the story of the captive woman (and her husband) allows a more personal reading, too. And this reading, that is, the wording of the possibility or even the necessity of quitting the bourgeois society draws an obvious parallel with Sándor Márai’s destiny.

Publications related to the topic:

Az út Canudosba – Márai Sándor regényének keletkezéstörténete [The Way to Canudos – the Creation of Sándor Márai’s Novel] (essay) 2000, October

Egy téma – két regény (Márai Sándor Itélet Canudosban és Mario Vargas Llosa Háború a világ végén) [One Topic – Two Novels (Sándor Márai’s Judgement at Canudos and Mario Vargas Llosa’s The War of the End of the World) (essay) Árgus, 2010 (to be published)