

Németh, Ákos:

## In Search of Lost Cultures

### - Criseology and Cultural Relativism in Sándor Márai's Travelogue '*Istenek nyomában*'

The change of the western traveling culture in the 1920s and '30s was influenced by the experiences of the First World War and the succeeding political, social and economical shocks. The wish to travel far away was strengthened by the suffering and deprivation of the war in the battlefields and at home, too. (Look: Fussell, Paul: *Abroad. British Literary Traveling Between the Wars.* New York, 1980, Oxford U. P., p. 3-15.) Traveling became a lifestyle and the main vehicle of self-examination and social analysis supporting experiences of transition in time, space and in culture. According to Samuel Hynes traveling was "*the basic trope of the generation*" playing a significant role both in poetry and prose (Hynes, Samuel: *The Auden Generation. Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s.* New York, 1976, The Viking Press, p. 229).

Nevertheless the cultural relativism of the decades between the World Wars is connected with the contemporary experience of crisis in many respects. "*The 1920<sup>th</sup> is the year of Spengler and it will be probably called annus spenglerianus by the chronicler of a following age. Which the writer is weak, the philosopher is quite cruel. First, he dares to say that European culture is fleeting*" – as it was written by László Cs. Szabó at the doorstep of a new World War (Cs. Szabó, László: *Fegyveres Európa.* Budapest, 1939, Nyugat, p. 8-9). This was the era of crisis in Western values and the rapid spread of totalitarian ideologies which inspired the literates to rethink the autonomy of literature and the role of the author being on the verge of collapsing under "the burden of history". The pragmatic function of literature comes into view in parable art: "*the writer constantly violates the boundaries of genre living in makeshift tents rather than a house and writing rather a journal or marginal notes than a novel making an inventory instead of depicting, collecting memories instead of data and interested in the World instead of person. It is a fatal signal when literature deals with the World instead of its eternal object.*" (Cs. Szabó, p. 9-10) Travel writing plays an especially important role among these literary forms because it is "*a dual-plane work with a strong realistic surface, which is yet a parable*" (Hynes, p. 228). (Look among others: Gide, André: *Travels in the Congo* [1927]; *Return from the U.S.S.R.* [1936]; Maurois, André: *My American Journal* [1939]; Waugh, Evelyn: *Waugh in Abyssinia* [1936]; Greene, Graham: *Journey without Maps* [1936]; Orwell, George: *Homage to Catalonia* [1938].)

In Hungary there was a generation, too growing up in the freer atmosphere of the ‘twenties and acquiring personal experiences about Europe. Sándor Márai was one of the most important representatives of the “*Generation of The Wanderer Years*” (Szerb, Antal: *Mindig lesznek sárkányok. Összegyűjtött esszék, tanulmányok, kritikák 2. köt.* Budapest, 2002, Magvető, p. 499) in Hungarian literature who travelled in the Middle-East and in the Western and Central parts of Europe equally at this time capturing his experiences in his works ‘*Istenek nyomában*’ [‘Search for Gods’] (1927), ’*Napnyugati őrjárat*’ [‘Guard in the West’] (1936), ’*Kassai őrjárat*’ [‘Guard in Kassa’] (1941) and ’*Európa elrablása*’ [‘The Kidnapping of Europe’] (1947). ‘*Istenek nyomában*’ was Márai’s first travel writing published at his age 27 holding the memories of his journey across Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Greece in the spring of 1926. This was his first book accepted by the later Márai as part of his oeuvre and was written especially for the Hungarian public when he prepared to go home after the years of his first emigration (Rónay, László: *Márai Sándor*. Budapest, 1990, Magvető, p. 51-62). Nevertheless ‘*Istenek nyomában*’ was one of the first Spenglerian works in the Hungarian literature: “*What was said by Spengler by scientific reasons was said suggestively by Márai.*” – notes Zoltán Szabó (Szabó, Zoltán: *Vigasztalásul útnak indulunk*. In Németh, László: *Magyarok Romániában*. Marosvásárhely, 2001, Mentor, p. 244) although we come across the name of Oswald Spengler only once in the book – in a rather bizarre and ironic context when the author compares the camels standing motionless in the sunset of the Nile to the German culture philosopher predicting ‘*The Decline of the West*’. Although the narrator’s point of view and his selection and interpretation of scenes are deeply influenced all the time by the work of Spengler. Márai as the son of the West starts off with Goethe’s *Faust* in his pocket and met not less than three among the further six great cultures listed in ‘*The Decline of the West*’, the Egyptian, the Antic and the Arabic during his journey.

The main question of my lecture is how Márai reshapes the relativism of the essentially anti-humanistic Spenglerian theory of crisis to the practice of intercultural mediation and understanding of each other. His basis should be the refusal of the hegemony of Western “Faustian” culture, the acceptance of equality between cultures historically given, the turn towards different cultures and the efforts to understand them setting the young author of ‘*Istenek nyomában*’ a good example for literates of today’s crisis.