

ROMANTIC DRAMA IN HUNGARY

MIHÁLY SZEGEDY-MASZÁK
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

1. Historical Tragedies

There are at least two possible ways of approaching Romantic drama in Hungary: one can either characterize the vigorous theatrical life of the early 19th century, doing justice to the great number of plays written by Hungarian authors, or concentrate on those works which may be regarded as important artistic achievements and original contributions to Romantic drama in general. The first method would be justified by the fact that Romanticism was the first artistic and literary movement to inspire a comprehensive prolificacy of dramatic writing in Hungarian. Yet as an overall treatment of the output of Hungarian playwrights may be out of place in an international context, our attention here will focus primarily on generally acclaimed masterpieces, taking it for granted that some historical background is a necessary precondition for their valid interpretation.

Although Hungarian writers hardly produced dramatic works of great aesthetic value before 1800, Hungarian Romanticism was much indebted to earlier theatrical traditions. When writing *Csongor and Tünde*, for example, Vörösmarty drew not only upon folktales and romances of the *bella historia* type, written by such 16th-century poets as Albert Gergei, but also upon moralities which together with mysteries had been performed in Hungary as much as in various other parts of medieval Europe. Furthermore, the strong intellectual character of both Vörösmarty's play and the *chef d'œuvre* of Madách, *The Tragedy of Man*, may owe something to the tradition of religious playwriting initiated by Protestants in the 16th century and carried on by Jesuits and Piarists over the next two centuries.

In any case, it would be wrong to assume that Hungarian drama did not develop before the advent of Romanticism. Bálint Balassi (1554–1594), the most outstanding poet of the Hungarian Renaissance composed a pastoral play before any major secular drama was written in England. This in itself suggests that dramatic language had a strong if uneven tradition before the Romantics emerged on the scene and wrote superlative works of art for the stage.

There are two main reasons for the quantitative changes brought about by Romanticism: a vogue of the national past and the construction of permanent theatres available for the bourgeois middle class. Although some Protestant writers of the 16th century had taken an interest in national characteristics, the international spirit of Classicism was not favourable to works stressing the *couleur locale* of Hungary. Besides, until the later 18th century there was much uncertainty about the origin of the "Magyar"

language. When in 1770 Nepomuk János Sajnovics, a Jesuit scholar pointed out that this native tongue belonged to the group of Finno-Ugrian languages, the discovery had a profound impact on public opinion: Hungarians became aware of their linguistic isolation in a continent largely populated by peoples speaking Indo-European languages.

This awareness, together with the enlightened despotism of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, may have contributed to the revival of nationalism. A significant change of emphasis can be felt if we compare two plays written by György Bessenyei (1747–1811), a leading figure of the Hungarian Enlightenment. The first of these two works, *Ágís tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Agis, 1772), is about the ambiguities of *absolutisme éclairé*, much in the spirit of Voltaire. The somewhat later comedy *A filozófus* (The Philosopher, 1777) has a Hungarian squire among its characters whose resistance to international progress and love of local traditions clearly shows the Hungarian writers' dilemma at the end of the 18th century.

Should Hungarians imitate more civilized nations or should they preserve their own customs and ways of living? Nationalists cited Montesquieu who once visited Hungary and argued that the same form of government was not valid for all nations, or Rousseau who had more understanding for the special needs of the Polish nation than Voltaire or Diderot. To see whether the past revealed any values worth preserving, one had to rediscover national history, and the theatre was well suited to that purpose. Bessenyei himself turned to Hungarian history for the subjects of his later plays, and the growing popularity of Shakespeare, as well as the influence of German literature, inspired playwrights to search for the inner logic of Hungarian history.

While in the 18th century most plays were performed in schools or in the private theatres of aristocratic families, from the turn of the century companies toured the country and permanent theatres were opened in the larger cities. At first, most of the new theatrical institutions had to face financial and professional difficulties, but they produced more and more plays originally written in Hungarian and worked for an audience incomparably larger than the theatre of the Esterházy, who commissioned the best actors of Europe, but did not show interest in plays written in Hungarian.

Within a few decades travelling companies and permanent theatres created a wide-spread interest in dramatic genres. In 1815 Gábor Döbrentei, the editor of the periodical *Erdélyi Múzeum*, organized a competition calling for a historical drama to mark the opening of the National Theatre in Kolozsvár, the largest city in Transylvania (a region that, after Hungary lost World War I, was given to Romania). József Katona (1791–1830), a law student who took a passionate interest both in literature and in history, submitted his five-act play written in 1813–14, based on the story of Bánk, as related by Antonio Bonfini in *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades Quattuor et Dimidia* (1487–96), a work commissioned by the Hungarian king Matthias I. The result of the competition was not announced until 1818. The first prize was not given to any of the plays submitted, and Katona's work was not even listed among those deserving praise. The author rewrote the text and published it in 1820, but his disillusionment was serious enough to put an end to his short career as a playwright. As was the case with some other works of striking originality, the public was not prepared to understand it until some

years after its author's death. Its first performance was held in Kassa (a large city today in the South-East of Slovakia) in 1833, and János Arany (1817–1882), the great post-Romantic poet, was the first serious critic to recognize its artistic merits.

In view of the extreme brevity of his literary career, Katona developed very quickly as an artist. His uneven but interesting lyrics, marked by a cult of sensibility, show him to be an experimenter with the language of violent emotions. Tormented by a hopeless love for a leading actress, Róza Széppataki, he shared the life of a travelling company. Translating and adapting German plays as well as acting under a pseudonym, he acquired first-hand knowledge of theatrical conventions. The more experience he gained, the more original his writing became. *Jeruzsálem pusztulása* (The Fall of Jerusalem, 1814), his penultimate play, contained some powerful lines, and in *Bánk bán* he created a work far superior not only to anything he had previously written himself, but also to all the historical drama produced by Hungarian Romanticism.

The delayed recognition of this play requires some explanation. The first decades of the 19th century saw a far-reaching and systematic language reform in Hungary, launched by Ferenc Kazinczy (1759–1831), an important prose writer, a minor poet, a translator of dramatic works by Shakespeare, Molière, Metastasio, Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller, and an extremely energetic organizer of literary life. To replace Latin terms widely and frequently used by earlier writers, a great number of new words were coined, sometimes with the help of non-existent stems and suffixes. Throughout the country intellectuals were encouraged to enlarge their vocabulary. Many of the neologisms were later integrated into standard usage; others became obsolete after a few decades.

In the 1840's a strong reaction set in. The natural ease of spoken language became the model of a new generation led by János Kriza (1811–1875), who discovered the Hungarian ballads sung in Transylvania, János Erdélyi (1814–1868), an important theoretician of folklore, Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849) and János Arany, the two major poets of the mid-19th century, who set themselves the task of purifying poetic diction. In the light of this change in public taste, many literary works written in the first decades of the century seemed outdated, and the reputation of *Bánk bán* rose because it was free of neologisms.

Katona disregarded the language reform and abstained from coining new words. As a result, the vocabulary of *Bánk bán* is much more limited than that of most literary works composed in Hungary in the early 19th century. And yet Katona was an innovator of poetic language: for him, syntactic dislocation and fragmentation, together with metaphor and wordplay, constituted the basic elements of dramatic diction. Aiming to find adequate expression for passionate emotions and mental conflicts, he often created an impression of syntactic disorder.

Katona's artistic intention becomes especially clear if we compare his play to other dramatic treatments of the same subject, i.e. the assassination of the wife of the Hungarian king Andrew II in 1213. George Lillo, as the very title of his *Elmerick or Justice Triumphant* (performed posthumously in 1740) suggests, eliminated the conflict by justifying violence. Almost the same could be said of Franz Grillparzer's undoubtedly superior *Ein treuer Diener seines Herrn* (1828).

The structure and meaning of Katona's tragedy are far more complex. Andrew II must go abroad, because his wife Gertrude is ambitious and has urged him to conquer another country. Patriotic nobles led by Petur, a man characterized by violent outbursts and an almost total lack of self-control, decide to oppose the German-born queen, who has too much influence on her husband and makes the country serve purposes alien to its own interests. The conflict is not only between foreigners and natives, but also between central power and feudal anarchy. Bánk must face a dilemma: he is at once the most powerful of the barons, but also the representative of royal authority in the monarch's absence. When Tiborc, a serf, comes to visit Bánk to complain about the heavy taxes peasants must pay towards the upkeep of Gertrude's court, he shows pity and even sympathy, while being aware that the fate of a country cannot be identified with that of the poor. He learns, however, that the foreign exploiters of the country have also brought him personal humiliation: Gertrude's younger brother Otto has seduced his wife Melinda by using drugs to overcome her resistance. Seeing that shame has driven her mad, and believing, not without good reason, that Otto must have been encouraged by Gertrude, he charges the latter with nepotism and corruption, and when the queen fails to show any respect for the dignity of his office, he stabs her. No sooner is the deed done than he realizes that the punishment he has administered is out of proportion with the guilt. He is further humiliated when Petur, whose conspiracy against the court has been crushed, curses him as a murderer, immediately prior to his execution by soldiers. The king returns to take revenge, but understands that as a ruler he must blame his wife for her abuse of power. Because of this, he can only make Bánk responsible as a private man. He is just about to do this when Tiborc arrives and informs Bánk of Melinda's assassination by murderers hired by Otto. Recognizing that justice is beyond his power, the king decides not to punish Bánk.

Even such a sketchy plot summary may suggest that a wide range of mental states is presented in the play. Unlike much Romantic verse drama, *Bánk bán* is free of monotony. Each of the characters speaks a highly idiosyncratic language, and tension is often heightened by clashes between individual styles. The dialogues between the insane Melinda and her bitter husband, the desperate Tiborc and his seemingly absent-minded lord, the angry Bánk and the haughty Gertrude, are examples of a lack of understanding on both sides which is due as much to widely different states of mind and value systems as to different idioms.

Even minor characters are highly individualized in their speech. Biberach, a vagrant knight who first assists Otto for financial reward, but later informs Bánk about Melinda's shame out of contempt for Otto and for the world as a whole, speaks a sophisticated intellectual jargon, full of twists and ambiguities. His complete negation of all values may remind one of Solger's or Kierkegaard's definition of irony, and his whole character is reminiscent of the demonic *humour noir* of Beddoes. Stabbed by Otto, his life seems to have been pointless, in keeping with his view that death is not tragic, only ridiculous, because there are no higher values which could give meaning to the life of any human individual.

If compared to Katona's masterpiece, most historical tragedies written in Hungarian at

the beginning of the 19th century seem to be excessively melodramatic. This is even true of the works of Károly Kisfaludy (1788–1830), the leader of the first generation of Hungarian Romantic writers. The youngest brother of the important lyric poet Sándor Kisfaludy (1772–1844) – who himself wrote for the stage – showed a keen interest in a great number of genres, ranging from the elegy to comic narrative in prose. He even tried his hand at the visual arts and became the earliest of Romantic landscape painters in Hungary. His first play, *A tatárok Magyarországon* (Tartars in Hungary, written in 1800 but not performed until 1819), is full of bombastic rhetoric, as he himself admits in an epigram composed in 1826.

More interesting is *Stibor vajda* (Voivode Stibor, 1819), a four-act verse drama about Hungary in the early 15th century. While in the earlier work conflict is limited to a hostility between the Tartars invading 13th-century Hungary and the defenders of their country, the interrelation in the later play between different conflicts creates more dramatic tension.

To understand the nature of that interrelation one must be familiar with the historical background of the events referred to by the characters. The Hungarian nobility led by Kont, Voivode of Transylvania, rebels against the absolutism of Sigismund, who is both King of Hungary and the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire. The king, a member of the Luxemburg dynasty and so a foreigner, succeeds in defeating the conspirators, thanks to the financial and military assistance given him by Stibor, a Pole. Kont is executed and Stibor inherits his title, thus becoming the most powerful of the barons, second only to the monarch. The implication may be that the cause of social progress is at variance with that of national independence, and their conflict is further complicated by psychological factors: Rajnald, Stibor's only son, falls in love with Gunda, the daughter of a poor serf who has been killed by the soldiers of Stibor.

As in *Bánk bán*, the centre of focus is the abuse of power. Although Kisfaludy's play lacks the close-knit structure of Katona's work, it is more than a didactic parable, because of the complexity of the hero's character. Rich and brave, he is "partly a man, partly a devil," an individual with an egotistical sublime. His view of the world relies on the assumption that there is no higher value than human will. Because he is not afraid of any human being, he is convinced that no one can defeat him. In a sense he is one of the Satanic heroes created by Romantic poets who have lost their belief in supernatural justice. Ostensibly, he is given punishment when a snake bites him and makes him blind while he is asleep, yet his character retains a sort of sublimity until the very end of the play when, having lost his sight, he commits suicide. His view of existence is not invalidated: even the closure suggests that there are only natural forces at play in the universe.

In sharp contrast to *Bánk bán*, most of Kisfaludy's plays were written for immediate consumption. Their success was huge at the time of their composition, but later proved to be ephemeral. This is true even of his comedies from *A kérők* (The Suitors, 1817–19) to *Csalódások* (Disappointments, 1828). Amusing and fresh as these plays written in prose may be, they do not show much improvement in dramatic technique upon such earlier works as the unfinished *A méla Tempefői* (The Dreamy Tempefői, 1793) or *Az özvegy*

Karnyóné s a két szeleburdiak (The Widow of Mr. Karnyó and the Two Rascals, 1799), both by Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (1773–1805), a major poet of the cult of sensibility. They are hardly more than a set of caricatures loosely knit together. There is only one aspect of Kisfaludy's comedies which affords them unquestionable historical interest: by contrasting an older generation, which observes generally accepted rules of conduct, with younger people whose ideals are emphatically individual and subjective, they signal a major shift of emphasis in the value system of the age.

2. Lyrical Drama and Fairy Tale

Turning from the works of Kisfaludy to those of Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855), we leave the realm of uneven works of local interest for that of major poetry of international stature. A tireless experimenter of poetic diction, Vörösmarty extended the semantic possibilities of the Hungarian language by creating highly original metaphors and a characteristically Romantic syntax, full of dislocations and fragmentations, and composed some powerful lyric poems expressing a tragic sense of being on a cosmic scale in a visionary yet condensed style. Although the epic poems and historical verse tragedies which he was compelled to write by social demand are remembered chiefly for passages of lyric character, it cannot be denied that occasionally his verse shows great dramatic strength. His earlier plays, such as *Salamon király* (King Solomon, 1827), *Hábador* (1827), or *A bujdosók* (The Fugitives, 1830) are lyrical tragedies revealing a profound understanding of Shakespeare, whose *Julius Caesar* (1840) and *King Lear* (1853) he later translated with great art. Yet his verse proved to be too poetic for contemporary Hungarian theatres; and so in the 1830's he tried to write more popular plays, influenced to a certain degree by French Romanticism. By the mid-40's, however, he was forced to realize that he had missed his goal – his heavily metaphoric writing was at variance with the melodramatic plot of pseudo-historical tragedies such as *Vernász* (Blood Wedding, 1834) or *Marót bán* (1838) – and he abandoned writing for the stage.

In his time Vörösmarty the dramatist was respected rather than liked. Although the National Theatre of Pest was opened with his short piece written for the occasion, *Árpád ébredése* (The Awakening of Árpád, 1837), none of his longer dramatic works could hold the stage. There is only one remarkable exception, *Csongor és Tünde* (Csongor and Tünde, 1829–31), a mixture of dramatic fairy tale and a *Menschheitsdichtung*, composed between the two creative phases mentioned above. György Lukács – who had a very uneven knowledge of Hungarian culture and dismissed many of its products as provincial – called this work the most original piece of dramatic writing composed in 19th-century Hungary, in his second book *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* (The Development of Modern Drama, 1911). What is more, he suggested that Vörösmarty's play may have been written with a new type of theatre in mind. There may be a measure of truth in this remark, for *Csongor and Tünde* has none of the shortcomings of many Romantic verse dramas and seems to foreshadow the Symbolistic works of Ibsen.

Csongor is a disillusioned wanderer who has travelled the whole world over, unable to

find the subject of his dreams. At the end of his wanderings, he meets Mirigy, the elder sister of Time, who is chained to a tree in the middle of the garden which is the property of Csongor's old parents. At night apples grow on this tree of life, but they always disappear before daylight comes. Mirigy tells Csongor about the fairy who had planted the tree. She is identical with the subject of his dreams, the old witch argues, and she collects the fruits of the tree at night. In exchange for this information, Mirigy asks Csongor to let her free.

To explain the success *Csongor and Tünde* has had with innovative theatrical artists, we must have recourse to the interrelations and sometimes even clashes between different semantic strata in the text. In many cases the same incident can be taken in a literal as well as a metaphoric sense. Csongor's aim is to find what he has seen in his dreams. This abstract ideal is impersonated by Tünde on the concrete level of action. He hides under the leaves of the magic tree, waiting for Tünde to arrive, but she is late, and he falls asleep. When the fairy appears, accompanied by her maidservant Ilma, she awakens him, but their meeting is cut short by Mirigy cutting off a lock of her hair from behind, thus casting a spell over Tünde and forcing her leave Csongor. While this episode may remind one of the more concrete material of fairy tales, the next has an ambiguity hardly found in oral culture. When the hero desperately asks Ilma where he should search for his lover, Tünde's companion indicates that the middle of three roads meeting on a plain will guide him to his goal. Compelled to continue his wandering, Csongor arrives at the crossroads, only to find that each of them seems to be a middle road. This may be the first hint to suggest that the play is about the loss of purpose in human existence.

Travellers approach from all three directions, propagating values that contradict each other. The Merchant speaks about material wealth, the Prince is a man of authority and power, and the Scholar has come to the conclusion that he is unable to understand the world, yet his lack of knowledge is superior to all kinds of self-assurance. Csongor's reaction to these interpretations of human existence is characteristic of Romanticism. The Merchant's basic value is self-reliance. In his view production becomes, as it were, the law of life. Spiritual ambition is hardened into material effort. Such Puritanism fosters welfare, but also selfishness. Vörösmarty seems to support a kind of anti-capitalism which many Romantics professed, yet he does not share the illusions of some of his contemporaries about the Middle Ages. This becomes clear when the message of the Prince is also dismissed, because power is viewed as resulting in an inexorable process which leads to destruction. As to the arguments of the Scholar, they are presented as having more validity, yet even his scale of values is rejected on the ground of not giving creative imagination its due. The untenability of three conflicting interpretations of human existence awakens the suspicion in the hero that all such interpretations may be false.

After his encounter with the three wanderers, Csongor undergoes further trials. First he meets Balga, a simple peasant in love with Ilma, who makes devastating comments on Csongor's idealism. Then he makes the acquaintance of three goblins who are quarrelling over an invisible mantle, a running sandal, and a whip. Csongor steals the goblins' inheritance, hoping that with the means of these magic instruments he can leave the

prosaic world he inhabits and reach the fairyland in which Tünde resides, but this episode turns out to be just another trap for the hero.

The distance increases between a chaotic existence, afflicted with a basic contradiction between appearance and reality, and a dreamworld which knows no ambiguity of values. After having been distracted by a whore, Csongor realizes that all his efforts to meet his ideal have failed. A long time must have passed since his meeting with the wanderers, because now he can hardly recognize them. The Merchant has lost all his wealth in the free competition he used to praise. He is a lame and penniless beggar, deserted by everybody. No less destitute is the Prince, having been dethroned by his people, and even the Scholar is unhappy, tormented by the paradox that a man cannot both live and think, and struggling with the dilemma between a disbelief in God and an inability to accept mortality.

Simultaneously with Csongor's second encounter with the wanderers, Tünde and Ilma find themselves in a desert and have to listen to the monologue of Night. This is the climax of the play. Having lost his belief in transcendence, the poet made Night assert the omnipotence of nothingsness surrounding man. Later on Tünde and Ilma catch sight of Csongor's garden, but they can scarcely recognize it, because it has been transformed into a wilderness. Mirigy is digging up the tree of life planted by Tünde.

Whether the closing scene that follows is an organic part of the whole, or an indication of some compromise the poet had to make with his audience is a matter of some controversy. Mihály Babits, an outstanding poet of the early 20th century, was probably the first to ask this question, in a seminal essay on the later Vörösmarty, published in 1911. According to Babits the closure was not an integral part of the structure, a position I myself adopted in my essays on 19th-century Hungarian poetry, written in the 1970's. It can hardly be denied that on the level of action the happy ending seems to be a kind of *deus ex machina* device: the goblins decide to change sides and capture Mirigy. The magic tree is transformed into a palace, and the lovers are united. It is equally true, however, that while the stylistic complexity of the earlier scenes — a variety of poetic idioms ranging from the tragic sublimity of the monologue of Night to the vulgar dialect used by Balga or the grotesque nonsense poetry spoken by the goblins — is replaced by a uniform style, this final narrowing of scope is in keeping with the circular structure of Vörösmarty's lyrical drama. The closure echoes the airy style of the beginning, taking us back from the tragic aspects of human existence to the dreamworld of fairy tales.

3. Lyrical Drama and Encyclopaedic Form

When trying to give some explanation for the delay in the success of *Bánk bán*, I referred to a reaction against the excesses of the language reform. That reaction set in just after the composition of *Csongor and Tünde*. A new generation gained ground in the intellectual life of the country. Notwithstanding their respect and even admiration for the sublimity of Vörösmarty's diction, the younger poets made an effort to bridge the gap between spoken and written language, rural and urban culture. Petőfi and Arany wrote

lyric and narrative poems in a more popular style, works which were conceded by everybody but the worst snobs to be masterpieces, but no talent of comparable originality emerged among dramatists. The new genre, a variant of the Viennese *Volkstück*, introduced by Ede Szigligeti (1814–1878), was hardly more than a form of popular entertainment, a kind of musical *Lebensbild*, supplying the uneducated with the clichés of Romanticism: a superficial *couleur locale*, a stereotype representation of the Hungarian *pusztá*, an operetta-like, sentimental imitation of peasant life, and a mannered stylization of inauthentic folklore. It might even be suggested that Szigligeti's plays from *A szökött katona* (The Deserter, 1843) to *A cigány* (The Gipsy, 1853) and *A lelenc* (The Foundling, 1863) initiated one of the worst traditions of Hungarian culture, a tradition which survived into our century in operettas, films, and all forms of *Kitsch*.

It is against this background that the *chef d'œuvre* of Imre Madách (1823–1864) should be measured. After the repression of the Hungarian revolution by the army of the Russian czar in 1849, some Hungarian intellectuals regarded all forms of superficial patriotism as not only cheap but also harmful. Laying the blame (and not without reason) upon certain Liberal governments (the English, for example), they came to the conclusion that Europe failed to understand the revolution led by Kossuth, because the Western world had a superficial and inauthentic image of Hungary, based upon the impression that the provinciality of Hungarian culture made upon foreigners. None of these intellectuals went as far as Madách, who considered patriotism almost irreconcilable with artistic creation: "Patriotism can be the subject of poetry only with us, who are struggling for our very existence; no great poet has ever resorted to it," he wrote in one of his notebooks.¹ Undoubtedly, the formulation of this promise does not belong to his early years, but was rather a conclusion he arrived at after Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister of the most Liberal of all nations, asked the Austrian Emperor to crush the Hungarian revolution as quickly as possible. In the pre-revolutionary decade, Madách himself wrote historical tragedies about medieval Hungary – *Nápolyi Endre* (Andrew of Naples), *Mária királynő* (Queen Mary), and *Csák végnapjai* (The Last Days of Csák) – whereas in the post-revolutionary period his chief aim became to give some interpretation of human history as a whole, having realized that the idea of national character, a concept at the basis of most historical tragedies written in the first half of the 19th century, was invalidated by Positivist science.²

In one respect Madách's somewhat far-fetched conclusion seems to have been justified: his most important work has been translated into more languages than any other piece of Hungarian literature. Despite, furthermore, the fact that all the translations are inaccurate and unpoetical (with the possible exception of Jean Rousselot's French version), *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man, 1859–60) has attracted the attention of many important writers, from Maxim Gorky to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.³

The great variety of interpretations this drama has enjoyed may indicate that its influence has been the result not only of its general subject matter but also of the ambiguities of the text. Some of these derive from the way Biblical material is treated by the poet. The first speech of the Lord in the opening scene suggests a Deist conception of God. The created universe is compared to a machine just completed. The wheels go

round, and the Creator may rest, for ages may pass before one spoke will need repair. Yet this static interpretation of the universe is immediately challenged by Lucifer, the spirit of Negation. The Lord could not have created anything without his support, he argues; and so he must have his share. This claim appears to be justified, because the Lord gives Lucifer two trees, having doomed them first.

Lucifer is further characterized in the next scene, which portrays the story of the Fall. His view of existence echoes that of Schopenhauer: time has no direction; it is no more than a series of eternal returns; individuals may be different, but the roles are the same. Man must have knowledge, because it enables him to choose; thus it brings maturity. Some interpreters of *The Tragedy* claim that Adam and Lucifer are the heroes of the play and that their dialogues reflect a dilemma with which Madách had to struggle: Adam's values are those of a Romantic Liberal, whereas Lucifer's mistrust of generalizations, value-judgements, and teleology may remind one of Positivist reasoning. Scene 3 – in which Adam is presented as living in a godless universe, and Lucifer's interpretation of time is further elaborated by his arguments that the present has no duration and thus no existence, and that the universe is constantly created and destroyed by forces which work in silence and secrecy – undoubtedly supports such an interpretation.

After three scenes of introduction, the main body of the text offers us samples from human history. Adam is anxious to know the fate of his race, and Lucifer gives him a chance to have a vision of the future through a long dream consisting of eleven episodes.

The first of these is one of the best parts of the work, as far as the sheer quality of the writing is concerned. An unfinished pyramid, symbolizing human ambition, is seen in the background. Its creator the Pharaoh is a Romantic Titan, a man who has become a god unto himself. Apparently he has become mightier than God, but he is tormented by solitude. Eve, the wife of a dying slave, teaches him to hear his people's anguish. The Pharaoh renounces his power and liberates the people. At this point comes the ironic twist so characteristic of the writing of Madách. The crowd has an everlasting longing for a master, Lucifer argues, and it will certainly look for a new tyrant before long. What we see does not contradict Lucifer's judgement. Adam cannot help admitting that he has wasted too much time in an aimless attempt to transform man. Although Eve suggests that they could find happiness in private life, Adam finds her horizon very limited and asks for Lucifer to lead him to new adventures.

Madách was an extremely well-read man, and he drew upon various sources when writing his masterpiece. Himself a Catholic, his close friends were Protestants, and his approach to *Genesis* was influenced by Milton and the Satanic readers of *Paradise Lost*. The symbol of the unfinished pyramid echoes *Childe Harold*, and the picture of Greek democracy in the next scene may have been inspired by Shakespeare's presentation of the crowd in *Julius Caesar*, as well as by Tocqueville's ideas on American society. Miltiades, the brave soldier, is sentenced to death by the people whose city he has just saved from the enemy. Questions asked previously are answered here, thus creating a sense of continuity, yet the first two parts of Adam's dream are also contrasted: the lyric monologues and symbolism of the previous scene are replaced by dialogues full of theatrical intensity.

If the example of Athens has shown that the general mood of the people can be manipulated by demagogues, and man does not need freedom, the next scene presents Adam with an antidote. The point Lucifer tries to make with his interpretation of the decadence of Rome is that the roles of the crucifier and the crucified are interchangeable. Unable to live in an atmosphere of total disillusionment, Adam craves after some guiding principle, but he must learn a bitter lesson: the same Christianity which appears as a healthy reaction against the relativism prevailing in Rome will turn into a new form of tyranny in medieval Byzantium. At this point one could assume that the message of the play is based on the underlying idea that all principles lead to disaster one they have been put into practice, but the following scenes show this to be a gross simplification.

The presentation of sensuality in Rome may be one of the less successful sections of *The Tragedy*. Taken as a whole, the sixth scene resembles *A kegyenc* (The Favourite, 1841), the only play by László Teleki (1811–1861), an outstanding Liberal statesman, without having any of the more profound intellectual implications of the earlier play. Both Teleki and Madách make chance the symbol of the loss of teleology, but in *The Favourite* the presentation of gambling is subordinated to a devastating vision of the total absence of human relations. In the first scene Valentinianus Caesar, the hero of Teleki's Romantic parable, drinks a health to a monkey, thus suggesting the impossibility of human communication in a society without communal values. As compared to this portrayal of the Roman Empire, the interpretation of decadence in Madách's work seems to be far more conventional.

Something similar could be said about the second half of the next part, the love scene between Tancred, just arriving from a Crusade, and Isaura, a nun from a convent. Still, the first half of scene 7 is crucial to the understanding of the ideological aspect of the meaning of the work as a whole. Heretics are executed in Constantinople. The conflict between the advocates of "homouision" and of "homoiousion" is presented as a ridiculous hair-splitting debate. Like John Stuart Mill, one of the most influential Western thinkers in Hungary in the post-revolutionary decades, Madách seems to have shared Hegel's condemnation of Byzantine society. One could argue that in *The Tragedy* this unfavourable judgement is made by Lucifer, and he falsifies evidence in order to convince Adam that all ideas deteriorate once they have triumphed, but this possibility is ruled out by the fact that Adam is forced to endorse Lucifer's conclusion by his own experience. Mill was an agnostic; in this sense his total condemnation of Byzantine Christianity was quite understandable. In the case of Madách, however, a similar value-judgement begs some kind of explanation. It is perhaps possible that the question whether Jesus was man or God had lost its relevance for the author of *The Tragedy*, and if so, the message of the work cannot be reconciled with Christianity. Such was the conclusion György Lukács arrived at; and it can hardly be denied that there may be an element of truth in his judgement.

It would, nevertheless, be an exaggeration to maintain that some kind of Positivist lack of faith is asserted in *The Tragedy*. Ideas may change, but their total absence results in boredom, a world that knows neither aims nor struggles. That is why Adam, re-incarnate as Kepler, yearns for excitement in life.

And now follows one of the most brilliant as well as paradoxical scenes of the play. In his dream Kepler is Danton, a kind of arch-Liberal, who hates the ruling class but tolerates all individuals. The crowd cannot understand his attitude; and so he, too, is sentenced to death by the Sovereign People he has served. One would expect a sense of disillusion on the part of the hero, but when awakened by Lucifer, Kepler calls his dream magnificent. Violence as such, it seems, is not rejected in *The Tragedy*.

Yet the next scene, a huge and well constructed *danse macabre*, gives another twist to the argument. Adam has grown older and no longer plays an active role in the action. A London Fair symbolizes free competition. This time Adam's disappointment is unquestionable: the French Revolution has led to a utilitarianism which not only kills the imagination, but also makes people cruel. Anarchy had brought a "dog-fight for a bone," instead of liberty. The only antidote to this chaotic yet ruthless world Adam can think of is some kind of a centralized community controlled by science.

When his ideal is realized in the form of a phalanstery, it proves to be even more destructive than the world of competition. Utilitarianism is pushed one stage further, material welfare being the only guiding principle. Individuality is repressed by division of labour.

In a desperate attempt, Adam looks for freedom in space. By now an aged man, he is flying with Lucifer, having left the Earth behind. It is dusk, turning gradually to night. Having lost all sense of direction, Adam cannot get over the sensation that life is not worth living if one has no goal in view. He has learned to accept mortality, but cannot do without some meaningful activity.

Asking Lucifer to show him the end of human history, he is taken back to the Earth. Lucifer lives up to his principle, and deprives Adam of his last illusion. The last human beings are Eskimo-like creatures living in a region that once belonged to the tropical zone. Adam understands that traditional forms of energy have been used up and that scientists have failed to find appropriate substitutes. Life is doomed to a slow death.

This gloomy perspective makes Adam cry out in despair; and his long dream comes to an end. We are taken back to the landscape of the third scene. Adam cannot forget his dream and decides to save mankind from future sufferings by committing suicide, but Eve tells him that she is expecting a baby. Defeated, he turns to the Lord, and tries to reconcile himself to his fate. On first impression, the work seems to end on a tone of reconciliation, but a more careful reading reveals contradictions in the text. It could be said without exaggeration that this last scene is at least partly responsible for the varying interpretations *The Tragedy of Man* seems to admit.

Adam's last words reaffirm his despair over the slow passing away of his race, a nightmare vision he is unable to forget. The Lord tries to comfort him, but his final message does not refer to anything more than the value of struggle. The point he makes is weak enough: he relies on a principle which Adam himself tried to assert before it became invalidated by the vision of the end of life on the Earth. In other words, one could suggest that *The Tragedy of Man* disqualifies any theological interpretation of human existence. It is no wonder, then, that some critics have characterized the message of the play as essentially non-Christian.

Still, in view of certain earlier passages in the last scene, such a conclusion may seem to be somewhat simplified. When Lucifer reminds Eve that her child has been conceived in sin, she affirms her belief in God's freedom to create a child to bring salvation. The allusion to the Messiah is made more important by the angelic choir calling mercy the most fundamental characteristic of the Lord. The fact that this conclusion and the one mentioned before are left unreconciled in the text may have something to do with the success of *The Tragedy of Man*.

When commenting upon the structure of this work, it should be remembered that it belong to the same genre as *Csongor and Tünde*. To call it a lyrical drama is to locate it as the last work in a Romantic tradition. The fifteen scenes constituting the surface structure are subordinated to a thematic deep structure, the dialogue of Adam and Lucifer being a projection of an inner debate between the teleology of Romantic Liberalism and the cyclical view of existence held by certain Positivists. To present this dialogue, Madách resorted to the structural device of the double (*Doppelgänger*), used by many Romantics. The relation between Adam and Lucifer is somewhat similar to that of Deianeira and Jole, or Forgách and Palizsnay, in *Férfi és nő* (Man and Woman) and *Mária királynő* (Queen Mary), plays which Madách wrote in the early 1840's.

A comparison of *The Tragedy of Man* with the poet's earlier works may reveal his double intention when composing his most important work: while keeping the general framework of a Romantic genre, he also wished to move beyond some of its limitations. Heracles in *Man and Woman*, Palizsnay in *Queen Mary*, Csák in *The Last Days of Csák*, or Lucifer in the Biblical poem *A nő teremtése* (The Creation of Woman, c. 1855), are all Romantic rebels guided by emotion, whereas the Lucifer of *The Tragedy* is a highly intellectual descendant of Romantics rebels; his Satanism is more akin to that of Baudelaire and Lautréamont than to that of earlier poets. He has a cyclic conception of life, yet his irony is mixed with pathos. The lyrical character of the drama is manifest in his somewhat uneasy, reluctant laughter at the end of most of the historical scenes which prove him right. He foresees Adam's failures, but registers them with a wry smile. He finds no satisfaction in his knowledge that Adam's teleological claims are mistaken, because he seems to be aware that the commentator is as much part of an interpreted design as the hero.

Although one could say that an intellectual monologue projected into dialogue is the most essential part of *The Tragedy*, it would be misleading to underestimate the contribution of Eve and the Lord to the ambiguities of the play. It is true that in some passages Eve seems to have none of the complexities of the two protagonists. Ready to accept the truth of Lucifer or the Lord, she lives in an eternal present. In Constantinople she is no more than a nun who observes the rules of a convent, in Prague she is selfish and empty-headed, in Paris her lack of personality is emphasized by the fact that she appears in two roles: first as the sister of an average *marquis*, then as a ruthless woman of the people, and in the last scene but one she is reduced to a mere caricature of herself. On the other hand, there are crucial moments when she is able to exert a decisive influence on the outcome of the events. In Paradise she has a deeper understanding of the intricacies of

the relation of man to God, in London her faith resists mortality, and in the final scene she is the one who can foresee the advent of the Messiah.

No less riddled with contradictions is the character of the Lord. A Jesuit author has accused Madách of irreligious views.⁴ This is obviously an exaggeration, but, as already suggested, it is undeniable that certain passages of *The Tragedy* may not be reconciled with Christianity without some difficulty. On the basis of his first words, János Arany, the great poet and first critic of Madách, called the Lord "complacent like a craftsman,"⁵ and indeed in the first scene the Creator seems to be not only passive, but even alienated from his Creation. Furthermore, the opening lines of the Choir of Angels may strike us with their ambiguity:

"Our part but His Great shadow on us thrown,
Praise Him who in His boundless mercy grants us
A measure of that light which is His own."⁶

This metaphoric ambiguity is further strengthened by another contradiction when the text swerves from *Genesis*: the Lord gives two trees to Lucifer but forbids anyone to touch the fruit of immortality: "he who eats thereof shall die." The Arian Milton and his Satanic interpreters may have inspired Madách to stress this ambiguity, especially in Scene 2, when Eve summarizes man's relation to God in the following way:

"Why should he punish? For if he hath fixed
The way that he would have us follow, so
He hath ordained it, that no sinful lure
Should draw us elsewhere; why hath he set
The path athwart a giddy yawning gulf
To doom us to destruction? If likewise,
Sin hath a place in the eternal plan,
As storm amid the days of sunlit warmth,
Who would the angry storm more guilty deem
Than the life-giving brightness of the sun?"⁷

Has Adam any chance to resist his fall? Lucifer says no, and the Lord does not care to contradict him. Adam cannot reconcile himself to his fate, and Lucifer's joy is mixed with sadness. Both of them defy the Lord. Surrounded by Calvinist friends, living in an age when the fate of Hungary was determined by external forces and the intellectual climate by Positivism, Madách dramatized a polemic consciousness. The line of argument underlying the dialogue between Adam and Lucifer follows a sequence of four statements:

1. my existence must have a purpose;
2. I cannot see this purpose;
3. it must have been set by somebody/something mightier than me;
4. to learn that purpose I have to find this mightier force.

Madách's conception of history is somewhat akin to that of Ranke, who started his career as a disciple of Hegel and moved toward Positivism. This German historian, widely read in Hungary in the middle of the 19th century, compared the history of ideas to a

sequence of theses and antitheses. He also claimed that the spirit of denial was an inalienable attribute of God.⁸ In *The Tragedy of Man* Lucifer's role is that of ironic denial, without which new historical reality cannot be apprehended. In the historical scenes Lucifer not only becomes the *Doppelgänger* of Adam, but also grows into a humanized instrument of a God who is absent from history. Such an overlapping in the heroes is a further proof for the lyrical character of the play. For Adam it is easier to follow Lucifer's arguments than the Lord's advice, because Lucifer stays with him through all the adventures and cannot help guiding him in his search for an answer to his questions, while God punishes him for a deed the significance of which he permitted to see only after having committed it. The two protagonists are brought together precisely because not only Adam, but occasionally even Lucifer is tormented by the aloofness of the Lord.⁹

Most interpreters have laid emphasis on the discrepancy between the ten historical scenes and the rest of the play. Explicitly or implicitly they missed a homogeneous organizing principle in *The Tragedy* as a whole. This must be considered the result of a rather superficial analysis confined to the level of action. On a deeper level the episodic plot is subordinated to a structural sequence following a strict inner logic that can be detected from the opening Choir of the Angels to the final words of the Lord. The thematic structure of the work is based on a sequence of disjunctions which is in sharp contrast to the ideal of a homogeneous paradise, the memory of which accompanies Adam and Eve throughout history. The disjunctions result in the falling apart of previous unities and the irreconcilable contradiction between the parts. The historical scenes show human culture — in the widest sense of the word — unable to reach a synthesis.

Right after the beginning of the drama, the disunion of God and the universe, relatively independent from the moment it has been completed, is already taking place, followed by the separation of God and man in Paradise. In Scene 3 Adam is forced to leave his original surroundings, and becomes a wanderer in exile.¹⁰ Scenes 4 and 5 (Egypt and Athens) present the conflict between the masses and the individual from both sides, in Scene 6 (Rome) the unity of existential freedom and material welfare disintegrates, while in Constantinople Adam abandons his previous ideal, losing his trust in religion. In the Kepler scenes man and culture, *de facto* power and *de jure* authority become estranged; Scenes 9 (Paris), 11 (London), and 12 (Phalanstery) show stages in the disintegration of end and means. In the vision of a capitalism based on free competition and in the satirical utopia of a perfectly planned and utilitarian society, the continuity of the past with the present is lost; this anti-historicism, together with the disappearance of individual rights may indicate a Romantic rejection of the ideas of Auguste Comte. In the Phalanstery scene analysis and synthesis, biological and moral, international and national values are in conflict, and the former effaces the latter. In some respects Madách almost foreshadows Nietzsche's objections to Positivism: not only by his cult of the individual, which both he and Nietzsche inherit from Romanticism, but also by his claim that activity is inseparable from contemplation. In fact, the negative utopia of Scene 12 is more akin to the picture of the utilitarian society presented in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Hard Times*, the works of Tocqueville and Matthew Arnold, or the interpretation of American society given in the 329th aphorism of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* than to Fourier's idea of a

phalanstère. In Scenes 13 and 14 nature and society, quantity and quality, surface and depth are brought into opposition, and in each case the latter is obliterated by the former.

In short, the structure of *The Tragedy* may be compared to a regressive sequence. The last stages in this sequence indicate that Madách foresaw the threat of technocracy in a period when he could have no first-hand experience of its influence in his own country, and when some Positivist thinkers, living in the most highly developed capitalist societies, were unaware of such a danger. The Hungarian poet attacks mediocrity and uniformity and considers artistic creativity a possible antidote. Like certain other Romantics, he regards music as the highest form of artistic creation, and in the best parts of his play he attempts to imitate the organic unity of musical form. An example of a gradually developed symbol can be drawn from Lucifer's speech on mortality in Scene 4:

"Didst thou not feel a gentle, cooling breeze
That swept across thy face and then flew on?
A little wave of dust doth mark its flight,
That mounts a few short inches in a year,
And some few cubits in a thousand years;
Yet a few thousand years shall overwhelm
The pyramids, and thy great name shall be
Buried beneath a barrier of sand.
Jackals shall in thy pleasure gardens howl,
And, in the desert, dwell a servile race.
And all this no raging storm shall bring to pass,
No shuddering upheaval of the earth,
Only a little breeze that gently plays!"

In passages like this a symbol is created in which abstract idea and concrete language, signified and signifier form an indissoluble unity, with threads connecting the unfolding symbol so organically to preceding and subsequent passages that the boundaries of the symbolic unit are hardly discernible. This is especially worthy of consideration in view of the great aphoristic skill Madách shows in the notebooks. The originality of the style of *The Tragedy* is partly due to a tension between aphoristic statements and gradually unfolding symbols. The structural function of these latter may remind one of the role of Wagner's "infinite melodies." Besides their encyclopaedic bent, this may be another similarity between the art of Madách and that of Wagner, another late Romantic struggling with Positivism.

This similarity, however, may exist only on a very abstract level, and should not be overestimated, for the interpretation of existence given in the Wagnerian musical dramas is radically different from that suggested by *The Tragedy*. Madách does not seem to believe in any of Wagner's alternative values: ecstasy (*Tristan*), a greed for power (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), or redemption (*Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal*). There is evidence to suggest that the Hungarian poet may have struggled with the idea of a universe empty of values. In some of his short poems autumn symbolizes a gradual loss of all values (*Őszi ének* – Autumn Song, *Sárga lomb* – Yellow Leaves), and

the speaker of *Iffan haljak meg* (Let Me Die Young) is a sailor who throws all his possession into the sea, until he himself gets immersed. Yet when composing his *chef d'oeuvre*, Madách did not go as far as suggesting nihilism. The contradictions of the final scene mentioned earlier indicate that while raising the most troubling issues of his age, the Hungarian poet gave no definitive solution to any of them.

It should not be forgotten that this is the only work of Madách which has an open ending. Of the two other plays dating from his best creative period, *A civilizátor* (The Civilizer, 1859), a satirical comedy, has a melodramatic happy ending, while *Mózes* (Moses, 1861) affirms teleology through suffering. Although both are interesting minor works, it is quite possible that the much greater success of *The Tragedy of Man* is inseparable from its inconclusiveness, the tensions it creates between different and sometimes even antagonistic conceptions of human existence. What is more, the fact that Christian, Romantic, and Positivist interpretations of *The Tragedy of Man* are almost equally valid may indicate that Madách's play marks the end of a period in Hungarian literature.

Most scholars view this lyrical drama as the last significant work of Romanticism, a kind of summing up of what had gone before. A few years after its completion important and sudden social changes started in the country, and a new generation of writers appeared on the literary scene. In 1867 a compromise was made between Austria and Hungary, and the establishment of a dual monarchy led to the rapid industrialization of the eastern half of the Habsburg Empire. Budapest became one of the large cities of the Continent. Positivism gained ground, and its vogue inspired young playwrights to portray the daily life of bourgeois or working class families under the influence of social determinism. The continuity with the past was lost. Romantic dramas were found too sophisticated, vague, or poetical for the stage. Naturalism became a dominant trend, bringing an entirely new conception of theatre, and inspired writers to compose plays that were radically different from Romantic dramas. Not until the turn of the century, the period of *Sezession* or *Jugendstil* in the decorative arts and Symbolism in literature, was Romantic drama re-valued, but by that time it was no longer regarded as a living tradition but as belonging to a past that had come to an end before the modern age of industrial civilization began.

Notes

1. *Összes művei* (Collected Works), ed. with an Introduction and Notes by Gábor Halász. Budapest: Révai. II. 752. Cf. his similar remarks: "Patriotism could be a poetic principle only with Hungarians, for the reason that other nations have no idea of the struggle involving existence and non-existence" (ibid. 751). "Other nations do not know of conditions like those in the political life of Hungary. We are in a constant struggle for our life, in one cage with the beast which is ready to devour us at the next moment. If they are fighting, their goal is no more than a change from good to better" (ibid. 762).
2. "What is national character? – Bad habits." (Collected Works. II. 757.)
3. See József Waldapfel: *Gorkij és Madách*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1958, and Attila Faj: *Probable Byzantine and Hungarian models of Ulysses and Finnegans Wake*. *Arcadia* 3 (1968),

- 48–72. One of the English translations (by C. P. Sanger, himself a member of the Bloomsbury circle) was published by The Hogarth Press, in 1933.
4. Jakob Overmans: *Die Weltanschauung in Madách's Tragödie des Menschen. Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, 80 (1911), 14–28.
5. *Az ember tragédiája*. A critical edition by Vilmos Tolnai. Budapest: Magyar Tudományos Társulatok Sajtóvállalata, 1924 (2nd edition), 2.
6. *The Tragedy of Man*. Translated by J. C. W. Horne. Budapest: Corvina Press, 1963.
7. Cf. *Paradise Lost*, III, 98–99:

“(. . .) I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.”

Madách might have read Milton in German translation. See the biography of the poet by his nephew, Károly Balogh: *Madách. Az ember és a költő*. Budapest: Dr. Vajna György és társa, 1934, 82.

8. Leopold von Ranke: *Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Reformation (1839–47)*. In: *Meisterwerke*. München und Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1915. I 81.
9. It is interesting to note that God is presented as inhumanly aloof in some of the poet's earlier lyrics:

“Where God rules over death and winter
Holy monotony sets in for ever.” (*Télen – In Winter*)

10. When writing the first scenes, Madách could rely on his earlier lyrics, in which Nature without Man (*Isten keze, ember keze – God's Hand, Man's Hand*) and childhood (*Hazaérkezéskor – Homecoming, Gyermekeimhez – To My Children*) often symbolized the harmony of an undivided world as well as the unity of the inside and the outside, whereas the wanderer in exile stood for man's alienation from his surroundings (*Önvád – Self-reproach*).

Bibliography

- János Arany: *Bánk bán-tanulmányok* (1859). In: *Arany János Összes Művei*. X. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 962. 275–329.
- Mihály Babits: *Az ifjú Vörösmarty; A férfi Vörösmarty* (1911). In: *Esszék, tanulmányok*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1978. I 208–255.
- János Barta: *Madách Imre*. Budapest: Franklin-társulat, 1942.
- Károly Horváth, ed.: *Madách-tanulmányok*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1978.
- Dieter P. Lotze: *Imre Madách*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.
- György Lukács: *A modern dráma fejlődésének története*. Budapest: Franklin-társulat, 1911.
- György Lukács: *Madách tragédiája* (1955). In: *Magyar irodalom – magyar kultúra. Válogatott tanulmányok*. Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1970. 560–573.
- G. Béla Németh: *Türelmetlen és késlekedő félszázad. A romantika után*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1971.
- István Sötér: *Álom a történelemről, Madách Imre és Az ember tragédiája*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965.
- Mihály Szegedy-Maszák: *Világkép és stílus. Történeti-poétikai tanulmányok*. Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1980.