

## **A Hungarian View of the World, Expressed in a Faustian Tragedy: Some Considerations upon Madách's *The Tragedy of Man***

Esther H. Lesér

Olvasd újra művét, s úgy fog hatni reád,  
mint valami véres aktualitás, korod és  
életed legégetőbb problémáival találko-  
zol; szédülten és remegő ujjakkal teszed le  
a könyved. A versek, amik nehézkesek és  
avultak voltak megírásuk napján, frissek  
ma, mintha tegnap keltek volna.

Mihály Babits

For someone desiring an objective insight into the Hungarian mental climate, Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* is an ideal choice. Its translation into various languages has proved its wide appeal, and Hungarian scholars have acclaimed it as one of the masterpieces of their country's literature. This work conveys the spirit of the Hungarian *Geist* admirably, while simultaneously it reflects Western European cultural trends. It typifies, to some extent, Western literature involving one nation's absolute rule over another with an independent cultural heritage of its own. Both intellectually and spiritually, Hungary has belonged to a Western world which seldom thought of it as a member of its cultural body. This study will attempt to show that Hungary has been part and parcel of Western culture for some time, by analyzing the connections linking Madách's *Az ember tragédiája*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Hegel's "Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte."

At the start of the nineteenth century, Hungary floundered in backward conservatism, a situation unrelieved by the spate of revolutions in 1830. By 1837, when Madách began his studies in Pest under the tutelage of the progressive professor, Antal Virozsil, the spirit of modern enlightenment<sup>1</sup> and nationalism had gripped Hungary's young intellectuals. They were influenced by three leading figures of this movement:

Count István Széchenyi, Lajos Kossuth, and Ferenc Deák. Each disagreed on the means by which Hungary should reach its goal of independence. The aristocratic Széchenyi believed in a spiritual revival, opposed radicalism, and attempted to raise Hungary's social, economic, and cultural levels. Kossuth, a member of the middle nobility, was an unusually gifted orator and became the trusted idol of both the intelligentsia and the peasantry. He demanded Hungary's unconditional freedom from the Habsburg monarchy. Deák, a member of the lower nobility, advocated passive resistance, while he worked toward reestablishing Hungary's constitutional rights within the monarchy. Deák's goal was achieved in 1867, whereas Széchenyi succumbed to pressure and committed suicide in 1860. Kossuth died an exile in 1894.

Madách felt most at home among Kossuth's followers. Devotion to Hungarian independence, the most pressing concern of his life, was reflected in his poems and student works, "Csak tréfa" and "Csák végnapjai." He began to practice law in the early 1840s under István Sréter, who shared his views, and married what he thought was his "ideal woman," Erzsike Fráter. He believed she did not subscribe to the "marriage market" mentality typical in small-town society, to which he alludes in the London scene of *Az ember tragédiája*. Madách was to be bitterly disappointed in Erzsike, a blow which deeply influenced his artistic concept of woman.

The brief and tragic revolution led by Kossuth's followers in 1848–1849 was defeated through Russian intervention. Haynau, called the Hyena of Brescia because of his atrocities in Italy, executed Count Lajos Batthyány, the prime minister, and thirteen officers in Arad on October 6, 1849, a day of Hungarian national mourning ever since. The incarceration of more than a thousand officers reintroduced Habsburg despotism. Others, Kossuth among them, fled into exile. Madách's poetry burned with emotion at this time; he had not fought, but he had been jailed in 1852–1853 for protecting a participant, János Rákóczy. Madách's family was shattered by conflicting loyalties. When he emerged from prison, his estranged wife Erzsike rejected him. During those bitter days in prison Madách studied Goethe's *Faust*.

Madách was a writer with varying strains in his literary heritage. He qualified as a Romantic, though his Romanticism was not modelled on the neo-Platonic school of Novalis. Madách was firmly rooted in this earth, though his fiery emotionalism suggests the *Sturm und Drang* poets of the preceding century. He also knew the major Western writers, especially Shakespeare, Byron, Hugo, Lamartine, Dante, Schiller, Goethe, and Hegel; among the contemporary German poets he favoured Heine.

During the writing of *Az ember tragédiája*, in 1859–1860, Madách was ill. Depressed about the fate of his country, humiliated at her defeat, and separated from his wife, he urged, along with Kossuth, that Hungary not yield an inch from her 1848 demands to Vienna. He dispatched his finished manuscript to the greatest contemporary Hungarian poet, János Arany, who returned it with nearly one thousand corrections and praise. *Az ember tragédiája* was first published in January 1862.<sup>2</sup> It was presented on stage in 1883, nineteen years after Madách's death.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, the work resembles a Faustian tragedy. Elements of the God/Devil/Man perspective; the theme of human striving; Man's relation to Woman; Man's wandering through the universe; as well as God's positive intervention at the end, all seem to indicate that the work was structured on the model of Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, Madách did not hesitate to adapt materials from other authors. The heavenly choruses; the jewel motif in the London scene; the secondary plot of Lucifer and Eve analogizing Mephistopheles' and Martha's scenes, are indeed all derived from Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>4</sup>

Close examination reveals, however, that these similarities pertain mainly to setting and method of presentation rather than to substance. Madách's concept of the theme and expression of his message differed greatly from Goethe's. First, the *Weltbild*: in *Faust*, the three-dimensional God/Man/Devil trilogy closely resembles the central concept of a mystery play. God is obviously omnipotent and omniscient regarding His creations, including Man, and even Mephistopheles. But Mephistopheles is a higher creation than Man; he has wider insight than Faust; Mephistopheles is the catalyst who challenges Faust's free will. In Goethe's work, Faust's surviving capacity for love is of the greatest importance, whereas Mephistopheles has rejected love and is thus incapable of love, God's principal quality. Goethe shows God addressing Mephistopheles as follows:

Nun gut, es sei dir überlassen!  
Zieh diesen Geist von seinem Urquell ab,  
Und für' ihn, kannst du ihn erfassen,  
Auf deinem Wege mit herab,  
Und steh beschämt, wenn du bekennen musst:  
Ein guter Mensch in seinem dunklen Drange  
Ist sich des rechten Weges wohl bewusst.

(*Faust*, p. 18, 323–9)

This passage in Goethe's *Faust* shows man's position; although he is mortal and incapable of seeing beyond his human boundaries, he has

God-given capabilities which enable him to meet Mephistopheles' challenge, a challenge that is simply an appeal for fair play:

Solang' er auf der Erde lebt,  
Solange sei dir's nicht verboten  
Es irrt der Mensch,  
Solang' er strebt.

(*Faust*, p. 18, 315-9)

Faust's final attainment is unselfish love, the means of gaining eternal life. The existential theme and setting in Goethe's *Faust* are aimed at the three dimensions of the Divine (Heaven), the Mephistophelian (Hell), and the Faustian (Earth).

In *Az ember tragédiája*, after the introductory chorus of the angels, the scene between God and Lucifer reveals a basic difference between Goethe's and Madách's work; here Lucifer is "a tagadás ősi szelleme," and is actually one of the components of God's nature itself; Lucifer's existence is the negative aspect of the Divine. God's responses to Lucifer are rather unconvincing arguments. He appears as an oppressive, absolute ruler rather than as an omnipotent Lord. Lucifer defines his own nature:

Győztél felettem, mert az végzetem,  
Hogy harcaimban bukjam szüntelen.  
De új erővel felkeljek megint.  
Te anyagot szültél, én tért nyerék,  
Az élet mellett ott van a halál,  
A boldogságnál a lehangolás,  
A fénynél árnyék, kétség és remény.  
Ott állok, látod, hol te, mindenütt,  
S ki így ösmérlek, még hódoljak-e?

(*Az ember tragédiája*, I, p. 14)

Lucifer's negative, cynical character and his spirit of rebellion in many ways parallels Adam's — and/or Madách's — view of the world; Lucifer addresses God:

Nem úgy, ily könnyen nem löksz el magadtól,  
Mint hitvány eszközt, mely felesleges lett.  
Együtt teremténk: osztályrészemet

and he goes on:

Fukar kezekkel mérsz, de hisz nagy úr vagy —  
S egy talpalatnyi föld elég nekem.  
Hol a tagadás lábát megveti,  
Világodat meg fogja dönteni.

(*Az ember tragédiája*, I, p. 15)

Typically, God has no rebuttal to this; it is the faithful angels who sing out their curse on Lucifer to end the first scene.<sup>5</sup> Since Lucifer represents negation and is part of an original element of the universe, his significance is quite different from that of Goethe's Mephistopheles. Madách's Lucifer represents a dialectic antithesis to God the ruler, having an equal chance to rule the synthesis of the outcome of existence.

The yearning of the two heroes also bears examination: Goethe's Faust is an elderly scholar who has learned all he could from books, yet who years to learn more: "Dass ich erkenne, was die Welt/ Im Innersten zusammenhält" (*Faust*, p. 20, 382-3). To attain this goal, he places a bet with Mephistopheles:

Weird' ich beruhigt je mich auf ein Faulbett legen,  
So sei es gleich um mich getan!  
Kannst du mich schmeichelnd je belügen,  
Dass ich mir selbst gefallen mag,  
Kannst du mich mit Genuss betrügen,  
Das sei für mich der letzte Tag!  
Die Wette biet' ich!

(*Faust*, p. 57, 1692-8)

This passage parallels God's earlier dialogue with Mephistopheles. No marvel may ever overshadow Faust's God-given capacity to strive; in each phrase, Faust's striving, however unconscious, encompasses the three dimensions of God's Universal Creation.

Since Faust was a human and an earthling, Goethe did not have to make his God face the embarrassment of being betrayed by man in Paradise, and so Faust never rebels against God directly. Madách's Adam, however, was full of ambition for knowledge and eternal life. His eagerness was so intense that Madách failed to invest Eve with her traditional role as temptress. Like a rebellious Prometheus, Adam grasps the apple, the first tool of independence, without intending to share it with anyone, not even Eve. He desires self-identity, and the right to live or die as he wishes; he never repents his sin against God; all he demands from Lucifer constantly is his rightful share of wisdom.

Here, the traditional God is crippled by the existence of Negation (Lucifer), and is consequently half disabled in all his manifestations. Actually, Adam's character stands closer to Negation (Lucifer) than to God, because of his desperation over his own limitation as a man. He is unable to give or to receive love before having achieved self-liberation.

Goethe's God said of Man, "Es irrt der Mensch, so lang er strebt." "Ember: küzdj' és bízva bízzál!" were God's last words to Madách's Adam. These lines show the basic difference between the two works: "streben" means "to strive" — "igyekezz" in Hungarian means honest endeavour whereas "küzdj" means "to fight and struggle." Adam's desperate struggle must be carried on, chaining him to an endless earthly existence because, limited by the hopelessness of his task, he stubbornly focuses upon the sole issues of self-liberation and identification. This passionate desperation has much in common with Lucifer's, except that Adam is not pure negation, as Lucifer is. Hope, even against all logical odds, remains a dialectically extant possibility for Adam. Goethe's *Faust* therefore offers a conclusion, a restful final message, whereas Adam's restless spirit is constantly present on earth, dramatically pursuing his yearning.

Madách's Eve does not parallel Adam's qualities. Representing the fluctuation of the human mob, she declines into subhumanity in scene 14 with the rest of mankind. In 1857, years before composing *Az ember tragédiája*, Madách wrote to his friend Szontagh: ". . . és Ádám a teremtés óta folyvást más és más alakban jelen meg, de alapjában mindig ugyanazon gyarló féreg marad a még gyarlóbb Évával oldalán."<sup>6</sup> His contemporary Károly Bérczy quoted Madách: "Anyámnak köszönheti Éva, hogy kihívóbb színekben nem állítottam elő."<sup>7</sup> Still, Eve is limited to strictly sexual and maternal roles, and these clearly do not resemble the role of Goethe's Gretchen.

The formal presentations of *Faust* and *Az ember tragédiája* are similar; the protagonists wander in the universe with the "Siebenmeilentiefeln" of the Romantics, and the reader is able to visualize the message of each actor by the various episodes. Goethe retains neither chronology nor historical authenticity in his scenes. He maintains the same limitless focus as does the whole God/Mephistopheles/Faust complex. The logical and historical chronology of the visions in *Az ember tragédiája* focuses upon its own hidden message, which is completely unrelated to and even unconcerned with the universal message of Goethe's *Faust*.

Madách's depression over personal and national problems, combined with his reading of Hegel, especially the "Vorlesungen über die Philo-

sophie der Weltgeschichte,” reinforced his ideal about the unification and liberation of a nation through a strong leader. But he did not accept Hegel’s notion of the leader’s loss of individuality by immersing it in the *Volksgeist*. A summary of these Hegelian concepts is germane here:

Kant’s Republic of Wills, the English concern with individual rights — all this betokens for Hegel the fragmentation that is the death of a culture. . . . Individualism is for Hegel a symptom of a nation’s decline.

The greatness of a nation begins with its unification as a nation — that is the only way it can acquire a *Volksgeist* with which to participate in the development of World-Spirit. Such a unification is possible only with a strong leader . . .<sup>8</sup>

Madách’s refusal to accept Hegel’s formulations completely was expressed throughout his entire life and work. One Hegelian point he found most incompatible was the rejection of Kantian individualism. This is indicated very strongly in the phalanster scene of *Az ember tragédiája*. Whereas for Faust people gain importance in his last moments of life, Adam is intensely involved with people in all scenes, from four through fourteen, and he strongly expresses his disdain for the mob. Adam’s feelings here echo Madách’s own, since he and his friends felt paralyzed in their attempts to help their people owing to the lack of popular support. He wrote: “Gyáva nép, megvetlek, átkozott! Szégyen fejedre. Te igának születéltél, igában görbede fejed, midőn először láttad a napvilágot, én veled többé semmit sem akarok. Elhagyva állok, híveim sehol.”<sup>9</sup>

Some Hegelian concepts were nonetheless deeply rooted in Madách’s mind; he preferred the qualities of the crowd to the virtues of the leader, in terms reminiscent of the Hegelian dialectic. This pattern gives meaning to scenes four through fourteen, as well as to his concept of the triangularity of the God/Lucifer/Adam relationship. Madách’s, or Adam’s, fervour also evokes Hegel’s reference to the leader’s ardour in liberating the *Volksgeist*: “So müssen wir überhaupt sagen dass nichts grosses in der Welt ohne Leidenschaft vollbracht worden ist.”<sup>10</sup> This line, translated into Magyar, repeatedly occurs in Madách’s personal writings. This urge toward achieving self-identity and to bestow identity on his characters became both Madách’s goal in life and the message of his art. In a speech, “A nemzetiségek ügyében,” written in 1861 but never delivered, he said,

Minden újonnan feltűnt megítélésében tehát, vajjon a kornak vezéreszméje-e és, mi értelemben, egyedüli mértékül annak képessége szolgálhat, a szabadság ügye előmozdításában.<sup>11</sup>

Madách's concept of "haladás" (progress) is also dialectically stimulated toward a synthesis of achieving "szabadság" (liberty); he explained in a letter to János Erdélyi:

Ádám mindenütt megbukik ugyan . . . de bár kétségbeesve azt tartja, hogy eddig tett minden kísérlet erőfogyasztás volt, azért mégis fejlődése mindig előbbre s előbbre ment, az emberiség haladt, ha a küzdő egyén nem is vette észre. . . . Az Eszme folyton fejlődik s győz, nemesedik.<sup>12</sup>

This idea conforms to dialectical logic only if the concept of Hope is kept credibly relevant.

Madách thus sees that "küzdés" (struggle), having the goal of "haladás" (progress), ultimately equals "szabadság" (liberty). He defines "szabadság" in these terms: "A szabadság alatt értem hazám minden beolvasztástól megóvott integritását." Whereas Goethe, the Westerner, permitted his Faust to consume his entire existence by traversing the three dimensions of the Universe, Madách, the Hungarian freedom fighter, knew that such an approach would be aimless before attaining the initial platforms of self-identification and self-liberation. Thus he dispatched his Adam on an aimless, paradoxical earthbound life-voyage, with only the words of a distant God to sustain him: "ember: küzdj' és bízva bízzál!" This trust or hope was to be the source of his strength in his determination to struggle onward.

After writing *Az ember tragédiája*, Madách became more hopeful. His last work, *Mózes*, showed a more conciliatory mood to Hegel's concept of the hero. Indeed, one passage in *Mózes* might be taken as the last message from Adam in his earthly wandering:

. . . kit az Úr választ eszközévé,  
Az megszűnt lenni többé önmagáé,  
S a nép szívében ver csak élete.<sup>13</sup>

Madách was a poet of ideas, but not a philosopher; a romantic with a powerful sense of realism; and a Western European intellectual continually striving for freedom. To grant him his identity as belonging to the West, means to understand in part the prototypical "Hungarian Tragedy."

#### NOTES

1. This term is often described as "liberal," but it should not be confused with current connotations.
2. This edition is dated 1861; the second edition, 1863.
3. Imre Madách, *Az ember tragédiája* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1972) is the edition used in this study.

4. J. W. von Goethe, "Faust," vol. 3, *Goethes Werke* (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1964), is the edition used here.
5. Madách's best friend, Pál Szontagh, was described by Károly Balogh: "Szontaghban két tulajdonság uralkodott: nagy műveltséggel párosult értelem és a páratlan cinizmus." [Károly Horváth, "Madách Imre," *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 62 (1958): 460.] Leading Hungarian scholars have suggested that Madách modelled Lucifer on his friend Szontagh.
6. Horváth, "Madách Imre," p. 473.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Leo Rauch, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (New York: n.p., 1955), p. 88.
9. Horváth, "Madách Imre," p. 473.
10. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte," in *Sämtliche Werke*, 20 vols. (Stuttgart: Fr. Frommann Verlag, 1961), 11: 52.
11. Horváth, "Madách Imre," p. 491.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Madách, *Mózes*, I, 737, quoted in Horváth, "Madách Imre," p. 500.