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Life-Conception and Structure in "The Tragedy of Man"

By

MIHÁLY SZEGEDY-MASZÁK

(Budapest)

Az ember tragédiája (The Tragedy of Man) is just as deeply rooted in Hungarian history as all the outstanding works in our literature. The difference is, nevertheless, evident: by adopting the common symbolics of mankind and leaving national references out, Madách raised the Hungarian tragedy of his age on the level of national existence. This is the specific feature that marks *The Tragedy of Man* off from the best works of the period preceding the Compromise (1867), such as the novel *Özvegy és leánya* (Widow and Her Daughter 1855–57) by Zs. Kemény or the long short story *Egy régi udvarház utolsó gazdája* (The Last Master of an Old Mansion 1857) by P. Gyulai, that otherwise are also symbolic. This fact accounts for the later popularity of the *Tragedy* too. Madách himself felt this deviation: in one of his notes he cast the blunt and painful truth to the faces of Hungarian writers: "Patriotism can be the subject of poetry only with us, who are struggling for our very existence; no great poet has ever applied it."[1] He deeply felt the weight of foreign oppression but at the same time clearly saw the danger of the sense of historically concrete thraldom growing into a metaphysics of constant anguish in the consciousness of the nation. His choice of subject is in accord with the fact that he was among the first to recognize national characterology narrowing down our society, culture and literature.[2]

When analysing the structure of the *Tragedy*, the bearer of Madách's life-conception, we start from the fact that it is a work in which characteristics of more than one genre mingle; the prevailing element is a lyrical one, because the scenes are determined by thematic structure and lyrical tone. The dialogue of Adam and Lucifer is nothing but the projection of an inner debate between the teleology of romantic liberalism and the cyclical life-conception of positivism. Madách represented these aspects by creating counterparts, a literary device that has its revival in the period of Romanticism. The characters of his earlier dramas: Deianeira and Jolé in *Férfi és nő* (Man and Woman 1842–43), Forgách and Palizsnay in *Mária királynő* (Queen Mary 1843, 1855), testify that Madách had already concerned himself with this structural principle. The passages voiced by Adam and Lucifer are the acme of Madách's poetry,

the most beautiful parts of his principal work. It was in their speeches that Madách improved the language of his earlier, non-anecdotal philosophical-historical lyrics that was the imperfect, though in some fragments already valuable poetical development of Vörösmarty's rhetorics. The two protagonists of the *Tragedy* are contrasted characters which, at the same time, closely belong to each other, thus resembling the doubled ego of Lautréamont's *The Chants of Maldoror* (1869), a poem so different from the *Tragedy* in its language. The historical scenes prove Lucifer right, no wonder that Adam cannot laugh them away, but it is also worthwhile to note that Lucifer's laughter — in most cases — is reluctant, too. The scenes introduce a sequence of interpreted undertakings. Lucifer foresees all Adam's failures but at the moments they take place he notes them with a wry face, feeling no satisfaction. Instead of a detailed analysis, here we only can refer to the fact that in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), his chief work, or Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), a book on phalanstery, the double-ganger structure is given a similar meaning.

We deliberately stressed the close connection between the *Tragedy* and contemporary works created after Romanticism. In this work Madách greatly deviated from his readings. Heracles, Palizsnay, Csák, or Lucifer in his poem *A nő teremtése* (The Creation of Woman c. 1855), were rebels guided by emotion, the Lucifer of the *Tragedy* is an intellectualized descendant of Mephistopheles in *Faust* and the Satan figure created by Byron; thus Madách modernized this traditional character, similarly to Baudelaire and Lautréamont. Lucifer has a cyclic-ironic conception of life. His irony, however, does not miss the tones of pathos or even tragedy. The lyrical character of the drama is proved by the fact that Adam's teleological claims are taken over by Satan as well.

Eve takes no part in the intellectual monologue projected into a dialogue that constitutes the marrow of the *Tragedy*. She is ready to accept the truth of Lucifer and the Lord at once, without thinking; she lives in an everlasting present without any reflection or memories. Compared to the earlier woman-figures of Madách, her character does not show such a qualitative change as Lucifer's does, compared to the rebels of the dramas written in the 40s. Her simple figure is in sharp contrast with the ambiguity of the Lord. Ambiguity with Lucifer results in depth, while the characteristics of the Lord are contradictory. A Jesuit monk, Jakob Overmans accused Madách of irreligiosity,[3] and it is undeniable that the *Tragedy* is in contradiction with dogmatic Christianity. It has a decisive role in the effect of the work that this deviation is manifold. On the basis of his first words, Arany called the Lord "complacent like a handicraftsman",[4] and indeed, the Creator who had accomplished his work, becomes associated with passivity, standstill as well. The poet even furnishes a basis for a positivist, say, Spencer-like interpretation of the Lord as the symbol of the restrictions of cognizance. We cannot, however, accept this conception, derived mostly from arguments outside the text. The first

lines, the characterization given by the Choir of Angels, strikes us with its 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.
> (Translated by J. C. W. Horne, Budapest, Corvina Press 1973.)

This metaphoric contradiction is followed by another ambiguity when the poet swerves from the story of the *Genesis:* the Lord gives the two trees to Lucifer but prohibits to enjoy the fruit of immortality: "he who eats thereof shall die." The Arian Milton may have served as an example to stress this ambiguity; when reading Byron, Madách also must have noticed the incessant hints concerning the double meaning of Milton's God. This is made very probable by the fact that in Scene II (In Paradise), Eve summarizes the basic situation of *Paradise Lost:*

> 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 otherwhere; 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?[5]

Has Adam got any chance not to fall? Lucifer says no and the Lord gives no answer. Adam cannot reconcile himself to the solution and Lucifer's joy is not without alloy; both of them defy the Lord. All this proves that Madách did not accept the positivist God-conception of Spencer. The *Tragedy* dramatizes a polemic consciousness built up from the following sequence of statements:

- my existence must have a purpose
- I cannot see this purpose
- it must have been set by something/somebody mightier than me
- to learn the purpose of my existence I have to find this something/somebody

Madách's conception — just like that of Kemény — is akin to the views of Ranke who started from Hegel and approached positivism. This German historian, well-known in Hungary in the middle of the 19th century, concieved the history of successive ideas as a sequence of theses and antitheses, thus giving no place for synthesis. He thought the spirit of denial to be an inalienable attribute of God.[6] In the *Tragedy* Lucifer's role is that of ironic denial, without which new historical reality cannot be apprehended and the outdated cannot be abrogated in a positive way. Nevertheless, not only Lucifer and Adam,

but in a way Lucifer and God also become intermingled in the *Tragedy*; Lucifer by and by grows into a humanized instrument of God, who is completely aloof of man. This mingling of the figures is another proof of the prevalence of lyrical tone in the *Tragedy*. For Adam Lucifer's arguments are easier to follow, for he stays with him to the end, helping him in his search for the answer, while God punishes him for a deed that he could realize — through the will of God — only when having committed it. God leaves him alone even after the sequence of disastrous dreams has been displayed by Lucifer. Not only Adam but occasionally even Lucifer are tormented by the aloofness of the Lord. The way Madách outlines the relationship of Adam and the Lord is similar to the situation of man left alone by God in *The Chants of Maldoror*:

"It was not me who attacked; He forced me to . . . Or was it not him who put the charges in my hand to bring against him?"[7]

Interpreters of the *Tragedy* have hitherto laid emphasis on the discrepancy between the framing and the historical scenes. Admittedly or implicitly, they considered the whole structure of the work to be unsuccessful, with no homogeneous organizing principle. However, the episodic plot is subordinated to a structural sequence following a strict logic that can be felt from the opening Choir of the Angels to the ending words of the Lord. The structure of the poem is built on a sequence of disjunctions with a contrapuntal background: an idea of heaven and the complete homogeneity of the world, an ancient conception that followed humanity through world history. The disjunctions result in the falling apart of previous unities and the insoluble contradiction between these parts. The historical scenes show human culture — in the widest sense of the word — unable to reach a synthesis. To find the central organizing principle, Madách was probably helped by his readings: Plato's *Republic*, the freedom-conception elaborated by Schiller in *The Bandits*, *Wilhelm Tell*, and *Letters on Aesthetical Education*; also by the thoughts of Hegel on alienation as a necessary attribute of human activity.

Right after the beginning of the drama, in the scene in Heaven, the disunion of God and the world, relatively independent from the moment of its completion, is taking place, which, in the scene in Paradise is followed by the separation of God and man. In Scene III Adam is forced to leave his original surroundings and becomes a wanderer in exile.[8] Scenes IV and V (Egypt and Athens) represent the conflict between the masses and the individual from two different aspects; in Scene VI (Rome) the unity of the freedom of existence and possession falls asunder, while in Scene VII (Constantinople) and VIII (Prague), Adam abandons his previous ideals. In the Kepler scenes man and culture get estranged; Scenes IX (Paris), XI (London) and XII (Phalanstery) show the grades of the disintegration of end and means. Among the absurdities of capitalism based on free competition or those of perfectly planned utilitarian society we can find the disengagement of past from present — in this

idea, as well as in anti-individualism, we can recognize the conception of Comte which Madách thus refuses. In the Phalanstery scene analysis and synthesis, abstract and concrete, biological and moral values, mankind and country are in conflict and one effaces the other. At several essential points Madách is a forerunner of Nietzsche's criticism of positivism: not only by his cult of individuality, inherited from Romanticism, but also by his disagreement with the separation of activity from thought, contemplation, and brooding. In fact, Madách's phalanstery is nearer to the utilitarian society criticized in *Hard Times* (1854), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843—44) or in the writings of Tocqueville and Matthew Arnold, and the American society torn to pieces in the 329th aphorism of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882) than to Fourier's conception. In Scenes XIII (Space) and XIV (Eskimo) natural and social law, quantity and quality, surface and depth meet in opposition and but the first survive. The structure of the *Tragedy*, taken as a whole, may be regarded as a regressive sequence of variations. During the disjunctions man is becoming more and more naked.

The peculiarities of this structure and its place in Hungarian literary development can only be comprehended if we compare the *Tragedy* with poems written in the middle of the 19th century. Poems that confront essentially different, mostly contradictory human situations in time; either on the level of philosophy, or the inner sphere of the individual's existence. Most of the best poems of the Reform Period mirror an apocalyptical vision, placing the rejected world into the past and/or present, and promising the fulfillment of wishes in the (further) future (Vörösmarty: *A Guttenberg-albumba* — To the Guttenberg album 1840 —, *Gondolatok a könyvtárban* — Reflections in the Library 1845 —, Petőfi: *A XIX. század költői* — The Poets of the 19th Century —, *Az ítélet* — The Judgment 1847 —, *Az apostol* — The Apostle 1848 —). *Csongor és Tünde* (Csongor and Tünde 1830) by Vörösmarty is the only one among the great works of the period in which cyclic motion, the return from nothing to nothing is expressed (in the monologue of the Night) with such artistic power that we feel the optimistic ending inorganic and melodramatic. After the lost War of Independence, however, this type of life-conception became prevalent: the nation, ruined by absolutism needed the consolation of a poetry of "faith, hope, love" — at least in the last lines of poems (Arany: *Évek, ti még jövendő évek . . .* — Years, Thou Coming Years . . . 1850 —, *Visszatekintés* — Retrospection 1852 —, Vörösmarty: *A vén cigány* — The Old Gipsy 1854 —, Arany: *Az örök zsidó* — The Eternal Jew 1860 —). The group of tragic poems representing the regressive process is much smaller than the above two, both before and after 1849. There is only one poem by Petőfi that can undoubtedly be listed here: his last one, written when the fall of the Hungarian War of Independence became inevitable *(Szörnyű idő* — Horrible Time 1849 —). Vörösmarty was the only one to write unsolubly tragic philo-

sophical poems both before and after 1849 (*Az emberek* — People 1846 — *Előszó* — Foreword 1850 —). What is more, it was also him who used this type of life-conception to express a sequence of frames of mind. In *Késő vágy* (Late Desire 1839), he expressed how the personality of the lyrical ego got mutilated, how intellect and emotion became separated, even preceding Arany's *A lejtőn* (Down 1852—57), an exceptionally pessimistic poem presenting the ego floundering at night with a premonition of ultimate hopelessness.

It is evident that Madách's principal work is related to the first of the above-mentioned types of poetical life-conception only in the manner of putting the question but not in answering. The similarity is more manifest with the other two types, though the life-conception and structure of the *Tragedy* cannot be called either melodramatic or tragic in fact.

What remains of man at the end of this devastating process; has the *Tragedy* got a solution at all? The question may partly be answered by noting that, as Madách understood, culture is not a product; it is partly the memory of mankind, partly a process, an activity. A substantial answer, however, must be sought deeper. From the London scene onwards, Adam ceases to be a protagonist, with the only exception of the Space scene where the regressive process stops: body and soul cannot separate. What is the reason for this?

In the middle of the 19th century, thinkers of the first rank were prepossessed by the idea of disjunction between the masses and the individual. Kierkegaard and — less consequently — the American transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman) hoped to find a solution in the restoration of the personal integrity of the inner self, while Marx sought it in the entire transformation of society. Individual and mass freedom are separated in Madách's conception, too. He thought the remedy was the genuine impetus of life-force, given in man from the very beginning. Vitalism has never disappeared from philosophy, though it was overshadowed by positivism in the middle of the 19th century. Madách, from a positivist point of view, disclaimed not only the teleological notions of Hegel's system, the grounds of speculative metaphysics, but also went beyond the forms of positivism prevailing in his time. The exclamation: "Lead on, lead on, to new goals, Lucifer" anticipates the vitalism of the end of the 19th century.

The last stages in the sequence of disjunctions, the main line of the *Tragedy*, prove that Madách was outstandingly far-sighted: he surmised that man is under the threat of technocracy in a period when he could see no symptoms of it in Hungary, and when positivist thinkers, living in the most developed capitalist countries (like Comte or Mill) were insusceptible to the danger. The poetic drama attacks mediocrity and uniformity, in the course of which man is degraded into a fragment of his own self, becoming unable to express his very human essence. The genuine impetus of life-force, however, manifests itself in the claim to harmony and completeness. Madách saw the

concentrated manifestation of this claim in the organic form of art. Like his greatest European poet-contemporaries, he regarded music as the summit of artistic expression, and in the most beautiful parts of the *Tragedy*, he tried to approach the indissolubly organic unity of the musical form. This is how he unfolded a symbol, step by step:

> 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.
> All this no raging storm shall bring to pass,
> No shuddering upheaval of the earth,
> Only a little breeze that gently plays!

In details like this, the poetic text translates the notion of vitalism into poetical language, approaching the Wagnerian ideal: instead of preconceptions forced on the concrete context from the outside, Madách creates a symbol that emerges step by step from the work itself, in which abstract idea and concrete language form an indissolube unity with threads connecting the parts and elements so organically to preceding and subsequent passages that the boundaries of the symbolic unit are hardly discernible. This is especially worthy of note if we consider that in his glosses Madách shows a great aphoristic skill, reminding his reader to Baudelaire's diaries or Nietzsche. The peculiarities in the style of the *Tragedy* are partly induced by the rhythmic alternation and tension between the aphoristic expressions and unfolded symbols. Madách's expanding symbols are analogous to Wagner's "infinite melodies". Besides their encyclopaedic bent and the conception of art aiming at completeness, this is another similarity between the author of the *Tragedy* and the master of Bayreuth.

This similarity, however, is only partial, the life-conception of the *Tragedy* markedly differs from that of the Wagnerian musical dramas. Madách can believe in none of Wagner's alternative values: extasy (*Tristan* 1865), greed for power (*The Nibelung's Ring* 1869—76) or redemption (*The Flying Dutchman* 1843, *Tannhäuser* 1845, *Lohengrin* 1850, *Parsifal* 1882). In the last scene God speaks of art created by man as a gift of fate, and in his last words he only repeats Adam's previous statements. The dramatic poem expresses the experience of "God is dead", and it means not simply the death of the Christian God, but the failure of the humanization of life and the disintegration of values kept in the highest esteem previously. Adam becomes weary of searching for the meaning of things because he discovers that the teleological universe, together with metaphysical structures, is falling apart. The main structural

line of the *Tragedy*, the sequence of disjunctions is to represent the story of this devaluation.

Madách faces the temptation of the denial of all values. In many of his poems autumn is a symbol to represent a period of losing all values *(Őszi ének* — Autumn Song —, *Sárga lomb* — Yellow Leaves —). The protagonist of *Ifjan haljak meg* (Let Me Die Young) is a sailsman who throws all his valuables into the sea, until he himself gets immersed. In the solution of his great work, Madách could not undertake the role of the prophet of nihilism, but, at the same time, could not take on the task of transforming values — like Nietzsche — either. The combative notion of *Wille zur Macht* is alien to him, for Madách had a positivist conception of the genuine impetus of life-force, excluding the possibility of its growing into a destructive force. The structure of *The Tragedy of Man* is analogous with Bergson's definition of the process directed by *élan vital:* "It is not the association or addition, but disjunction and doubling of elements."[10]

The difference is remarkable here, too. For Nietzsche and Bergson the question is answered by the notion of *Wille zur Macht* or *élan vital.* Madách stops half-way between the realization of the loss of values (the denial of metaphysics) and the setting up of new principles of value (the reversing of metaphysics). *The Tragedy of Man* raises the most troubling questions of its age, and instead of giving an unambiguous answer, the drama moves in the medium of problematism rather than in that of systematism, leaving the question open, criticizing previous experiments of giving an answer and leaving the reader in the anxiety of questioning. This is the only drama in which Madách left the ending open: the sharp satire of his significant work, *A civilizátor* (The Civilizator) is solved by a melodramatic ending; in *Moses* he identifies himself with teleology toiled for so much. Thus, the life-conception of the *Tragedy* cannot be expanded to the whole of Madách's life-work, it is but a given stage in his poetic development. In the last analysis, the intensive aesthetical effects of this principal work can be attributed to this openness, the constant tension between the possibilities of antagonistic world-conceptions.

NOTES

[1] *Complete Works.* Prepared for the press, introduced and annotated by Gábor Halász. Budapest, 1942. II 752. Cf. similar statements: "Patriotism could only be a poetical principle with the Hungarians, because other nations have no idea of the struggle between existence and non-existence." *(Ibid.* 751.) "Other peoples have no notion 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 that is ready to devour us in every minute. They only fight for a change from good to better." *(Ibid.* 762.)

[2] "What is national character? — Bad habits." *(Complete Works,* II 757.)

[3] Overmans, J., *Die Weltanschauung in Madách's Tragödie des Menschen.* Stimmen aus Maria-Laach, 1911, 14—28.

[4] *The Tragedy of Man.* Prepared for the press by Vilmos Tolnai. Budapest, 1923. 2.

[5] 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 Balogh, K., *Madách: The Poet and the Man,* Budapest, 1934. 82.

[6] Ranke, L., *Deutsche Geschichte in Zeitalter der Reformation* (1839—47). "Meisterwerke". München und Leipzig, 1913, I. 81.

[7] Le comte de Lautréamont: *Les Chants de Maldoror.* Chant deuxième. Ducasse, I., *Œuvres complètes.* Paris, 1969 (Le livre de poche). 100. In his earlier poems too, Madách presented God as unhumanly aloof:

"Where God is ruling over death and winter
Holy monotony sets in for ever." *(Télen* — In Winter.)

[8] In the first scenes Madách could rely to a great extent on his previous lyrical achievements, where Nature without Man *(Isten keze, ember keze — God's Hand, Man's Hand —)* and childhood *(Hazaérkezéskor* — Arriving Home 1843 — *Gyermekeimhez* — To My Children 1851—) were recurring motifs, symbolizing the harmony of a genuine and undivided world, as well as the unity of ego and non-ego; whereas the figure of the wanderer in exile stood for man's alienation from his surroundings *(Önvád* — Self-reproach —).

[9] Cf. *Handwörterbuch der Physiologie.* Braunschweig, 1842, edited by R. Wagner; an entry with the title: "Leben, Lebenskraft"; or Lotze, R. H., *Allgemeine Pathologie und Therapie als mechanische Naturwissenschaften* (Second revised edition, Leipzig, 1842).

[10] Bergson, H., *L'évolution créatrice* (1907). Œuvres. Paris, 1963. 571.