

## **Madách Revisited: Toward a New Translation of the *Tragedy of Man***

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Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* was published in 1861. The following year János Erdélyi launched a full-scale attack on the work in a lengthy essay and thereby precipitated a critical controversy that has continued to our own day. What precisely is the meaning of the fifteen scenes that constitute this strange dramatic poem – in form, a mystery play that traces in a traditional manner the history of Christian salvation from the beginning of creation to the end of the world; in content, an ever-darkening series of vignettes demonstrating the successive defeat and ultimate death of all human aspirations? And then there was the matter of the work's style: halting meters and irregular versification; awkward turns of phrase and unidiomatic constructions; dialectal provincialisms and archaic diction. The constantly recurring charge was that the poet of *The Tragedy* was dwarfed by the thinker. The fact remains that, when *The Tragedy* was staged in 1883 at the National Theater in Budapest, it became an immediate stage success. The dramatic poem thus became a poetic drama. Thus, whatever the stylistic shortcomings of Madách's work, its tantalizing ambiguities, its propulsive momentum, and its cumulative emotional intensity swept before it all adverse criticism. By 1963, at the National Theater alone (not counting the provinces), *The Tragedy of Man* received a thousand performances; it also became a required part of the curricula of most secondary schools. In brief, Madách's work acquired the status of a national classic, both as poetic drama and as dramatic poem.<sup>1</sup>

How does one go about orchestrating a credible English version of such a classic? The first step is to see what previous attempts look like. There have been altogether four English versions of *The Tragedy*, the last having been published in 1963.<sup>2</sup> It is from this version that I quote a passage, taken from Scene XI, the London Scene. Lucifer takes Adam to task for placing faith in the progress of history:

The groaning of the slaves on Egypt's sand  
Would not have reached to such a height as this;  
And, save for that, how godlike was their work!  
And did not once in Athens worthily,  
The sovereign people, when it sacrificed  
A great man, well beloved, the State to save  
From peril might else have threatened it,  
If we from such a height all things can view  
And tears and idle doubt mar not our sight?

The objection to all this is not that it is light years away from what Madách wrote, or that it makes unintelligible what in the original is eminently clear, but that the whole thing is conceived in that peculiar pidgin English that Victorian orientalist reserved for "Englishing" the Code of Hammurabi. The first requirement, therefore, of a viable English version is that it stay true to the state of the English language of the translator's own day. This is such a truism that I need waste no time elaborating on it.

But what, for purposes of verse translation, *is* the state of English in 1977? We are still very much in that age whose American spokesman made the hero of his *A Farewell to Arms* remark about the "official" vocabulary of World War I: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. . . . There were many words you could not stand to hear . . . such as glory, honor, courage or hallow. . . ." Hemingway's tight-lipped embarrassment still prevails in Anglo-American literature. Such an anti-romantic, anti-rhetorical attitude stands in contrast to the state of the Hungarian language, not just in Madách's day, but even as late as the 1920's. An anecdote about Babits, dating from the 1920's, makes the point. When asked what Hungarian poem he considered the most beautiful, Babits replied, "Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind,' in Árpád Tóth's translation." Whether true or apocryphal, the anecdote indicates that the kind of emotional rapture, romantic intensity, and large-scaled rhetorical pathos that characterizes much of Shelley could still find a receptive audience in post-World War I Hungary. How much the more so, then, in the 1860's, when not only in Hungary but elsewhere, too — one thinks of the "serious" passages of Dickens — the oversized rhetorical gesture was an accepted part of literary convention.

Of the three major personae in *The Tragedy*, it is of course Lucifer who is the least subject to the symptoms of this rhetorical convention. I say "of course" because Lucifer, the embodiment of critical rationalism,

employs the tone and vocabulary either of a philosophical realist, or those of a mordant cynic, whose chief illusion is that he is superior to all illusions. Nor is the language of Eve particularly troublesome. Deeply involved as she is in the life of the emotions, Eve is too busy living, as it were, to give vent to what we would consider exalted sentiment. It is Adam, surely, who sets the translator the greatest challenge. Created almost for the sole purpose of being always disappointed, Adam is less a living character than an animated allegorical function, whose hopes-raised, hopes-dashed attitudes pervade *The Tragedy*. Adam's very stance, therefore, is that of an inveterate idealist, a romantic optimist, who moves from age to age, from one social order to another, always seeking the perfect institutionalization of human brotherhood, and always meeting disenchantment. Appropriately enough, his language is filled with words like "pure," "sacred," "noble," "exalted," "radiant," etc. — in brief, all the glittering verbal counters of the storehouse of nineteenth-century rhetoric. The cumulative effect of such terms and expressions is a tendency — one that a translator must somehow cope with — to endow Adam with a naivete and a kind of predictable two-dimensionality that work against his being what Madách intended him to be (and what in the Hungarian he surely *is*): the spokesman for what is best in all of us, the spokesman with whom all of us identify. For a translator to edit such Shelleyesque language out of Adam's lines would be to destroy the very essence of the figure. Accordingly, I have tried, as best I could, to retain the sum and substance of such verbal gestures, but to tone them down wherever I found it possible to do so.

In general, I set myself one major overarching goal: to convey the impact of the original by following closely Madách's own dramatic cadences, hoping thereby to achieve an English approximation of the living voices of my Hungarian model. To this end, I have relied on whatever opportunities are afforded by blank verse — the basic meter of Madách's original Hungarian — to match the English version to the Hungarian one. Too, I have relied on blank verse to give the translation a degree of elevation and a sense of remoteness that I consider the acceptable modern equivalent of Madách's own archaic eloquence. Since much of *The Tragedy* takes the form of dialogue, I thought it best to render such passages in a realistic, indeed, at times colloquial style, using lightly stressed verse, as free as possible from the declamatory — trying thereby to reproduce the easy movement of the original. And, finally, I decided, for better or worse, to render into rhyme only a small part of the lines that rhyme in the Hungarian — *The Tragedy of Man* has 4,114 lines, of which a little more than 600 are rhymed — primarily

because most such lines are imbedded in the blank verse itself, more often than not in non-strategic places, and are so unstressed in their rhymes or so arbitrary in their patterns that the reader scarcely notes their existence as rhymed lines; when he does, he frequently cannot determine whether they are deliberate or merely adventitious. Thus I retained the rhymes only in extended passages of strongly marked rhymes, and even then only if I could do so without violence to the semantic sense. Where this proved impossible, I retained the meter, but not the rhymes.

How well I have achieved my aim, I must let others judge.

## SCENE I

(Heaven. The Lord, suffused with the light of glory, sits upon his throne, surrounded by the angelic host, kneeling. The four archangels stand next to the throne. Intense light.)

Chorus of Angels: We hymn hosannas to our Lord on high!  
Heaven and earth exult with praise of him  
whose word commanded every thing to be  
and on whose glance their destiny depends.  
He is the all-embracing plenitude  
of knowledge and of power and of bliss;  
we are but shadows of his radiance.  
We glorify him for that endless grace  
that granted us this share in his effulgence.  
Incarnate is the great eternal thought;  
behold, the consummation of creation!  
From every thing that breathes, the Lord awaits  
a fitting homage to his holy throne.

The Lord: The mighty work is finished — yes;  
the engine turns, its maker rests.  
For eons it will wheel about its axle  
before one cog will need to be renewed.  
Up, you guardian-spirits of my worlds, up,  
inaugurate your endless orbitings,  
and let me once more revel in your grace  
as you traverse your rounds beneath my feet.

(To the hushed strains of the music of the spheres, the guardian spirits rush past the throne, wheeling in front of them single and double stars, comets, and nebulas of various sizes and colors.)

Chorus of Angels: Look! see that haughty globe of flame  
so proudly flaunting its own light;  
and yet, it only benefits  
a humble stellar constellation.  
But here, this tiny twinkling star  
that seems to be a feeble lamp,  
is yet, for myriads of creatures,  
a world immeasurably great.

Two spheres contend with one another,  
bearing down close, flying apart;  
this grappling is the splendid brake  
that curbs and guides their onward course.

Down thunders that one, striking fear  
in all who view it from afar;  
but in its bosom multitudes  
find happiness and gentle peace.  
How humbly this one bears itself:  
in time to come — the Star of Love;  
may it be nurtured tenderly,  
a solace to the earthly race.

Out there, new worlds, as yet unborn;  
in here, the tombs of dying ones:  
an admonition to the vain,  
a comfort to the faint of heart.  
In riot and in disarray  
a monstrous comet hurtles down;  
but, lo! it hears the Lord's command  
and sets its crooked path in order.

Come here, dear youthful spirit, come  
and bring your iridescent globe  
cloaked in white or verdant veils  
of alternating dark and light.  
Heaven's great blessings be with you!  
Go onward, brave and undismayed;  
within your tiny boundaries  
great ideas will struggle and clash.

Though smiles and tears, the fair and ugly  
will take their turns like spring and winter,  
these lights and shades will constitute  
the Lord's anger, the Lord's favor.

(The guardian spirits of the stars withdraw.)

Archangel Gabriel: You, who circumscribed unending space  
by increating matter in the void;  
who generated with a single word  
all distances and magnitudes,  
hosanna to you, Wisdom.

(Prostrates himself)

Archangel Michael: You, who yoked the changeless to the changing,  
creating everlastingness and time,  
individuals and generations,  
hosanna to you, Power.

(Prostrates himself)

Archangel Raphael: You, who radiate beatitude  
and summon matter to self-consciousness,  
you, who consecrate the universe  
communicant of your transcendent wisdom,  
hosanna to you, Goodness.

(Prostrates himself)

(An extended pause)

The Lord: And you, Lucifer, standing silent, self-sufficient?  
Have you nothing to say in praise of me?  
Or can it be my work displeases you?

Lucifer: And what should I be pleased with? That a few  
substances, clad with certain properties  
that you perhaps knew nothing of  
till they revealed themselves to you  
— or if you did, you could not alter them —  
should now be kneaded pell-mell into globes  
that tug and push and jostle one another,  
wake to self-awareness in a few worms,  
till all of space is filled, till all is cooled,  
and only the indifferent slag is left?  
If man can con your trick, he too, some day  
will bring this off inside his laboratory.  
You, for your part, placed man in your large kitchen  
and now indulge his bungling clumsiness,  
his godlike posturings, his botched concoctions;  
but when he comes to spoil your cookery  
you'll flare up in a rage — by then, too late.  
Yet what do you expect of such a dilettante?  
Then again — to what end, this whole creation?  
To glorify yourself you wrote a poem,

matched it to this feeble hurdy-gurdy  
and listen to the same old tune  
creak on and on in endless repetition.  
Is it appropriate that such an elder  
play games that only children can enjoy —  
in which a small spark, crammed into the mud,  
mimes its maker, not as faithful likeness,  
but only as distorted parody;  
freedom pursues fate, and all is devoid  
of meaning and intelligent accord.

The Lord: Homage only, not censure, is my due.

Lucifer: I give you only what I can -- my essence.  
(Points to the angels)  
This wretched crew here praises you enough,  
and rightly so, for it was you  
who gave them birth, as light does to its shade;  
but I — I live from all eternity.

The Lord: Ha, insolent! were you not born of matter, too?  
Where was your realm, where was your might, before?

Lucifer: I, too, might ask the same of you.

The Lord: What here is bodied forth into existence  
has lived deep in my mind, time without end.

Lucifer: Among your thoughts did you not sense the void  
that was the obstacle to every being  
and that compelled you to create?  
This obstacle was Lucifer,  
the primal spirit of negation.  
You overpowered me, for it's my fate  
incessantly to fail in all my struggles,  
but then, renewed in strength, to rise again.  
You created matter, I won full scope;  
side by side with life stands death,  
and side by side with happiness, dejection;  
by light, the shade, and doubt blights every hope.



I stand, you see, where you do — everywhere;  
should I, who know you so well, bow in homage?

The Lord: Ha! seditious spirit, out of my sight!  
I could annihilate you -- but no! Banished  
from every spiritual bond, fight on  
among the dregs, a hated alien.  
And in your bleak and anguished loneliness  
let this one thought torment you endlessly;  
shake as you will your dust-forged manacles,  
your struggle with the lord is doomed to fail.

Lucifer: No, not so fast; I'll not be lightly heaved  
aside, like some shoddy tool, now grown useless.  
It was together we created;  
I now demand my rightful share.

The Lord Let it be as you wish. Look down  
(with upon the earth, upon the grove of Eden;  
scorn): there, in the middle, stand two slender trees;  
I curse the both of them; now they are yours.

Lucifer: A scanty, tight-fisted dole, oh great lord;  
but a bare foot of ground will do for me;  
for if negation once can plant its feet  
it will subvert your whole created world.

(Sets out to leave)

Chorus of Angels: Be banished from God's sight, forever damned.  
Hosanna to the Lord, giver of laws.

## NOTES

1. The only full-length study in English of Madách is by Enikő Molnár Basa, *The Tragedy of Man as an Example of the Poeme d'Humanite: an Examination of the Poem by Imre Madach with Reference to the Relevant Works of Shelley, Byron, Lamartine and Hugo*. Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1972. DA133A (1973). Order No. 73-4799. Briefer treatments in English are by Charles Wojatsek, "The Philosophical and Ethical Concept of the Tragedy of Man," *Slavic and East European Studies*, VI, 210-227 (1961), and by the present writer, "'The Tragedy of Man': Salvation or Tragedy?" *Acta Literaria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, XI, 291-308 (1973).  
Of the enormous number of critical studies in Hungarian, two older ones have attained lasting distinction: Géza Voinovich, *Madách Imre és Az Ember Tragédiája* (Budapest, 1922), and János Barta, *Madách Imre* (Budapest, 1942). In the last two decades by far the most significant critic has been István Sőtér, whose discussions of Madách may be found in *Romantika és realizmus* (Budapest, 1956), *Nemzet és haladás* (Budapest, 1963), *Álom a történelemről* (Budapest, 1965), and, finally, *A magyar irodalom története* (Budapest, 1965), IV, 330-361.
2. All the translations bear the title *The Tragedy of Man*. The names of the translators and the dates of publication are: William N. Loew (New York: Arcadia Press, 1908); C. P. Sanger (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), reprinted in 1955 (Sydney: Pannonia Press); Charles Henry Meltzer and Paul Vajda, 1933 (Budapest), the 4th and final edition in 1960 (Budapest: Corvina); J.C.W. Horne (Budapest: Corvina, 1963).