

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

When Imre Madách published *The Tragedy of Man* in 1862, he little thought his work would be controversial. That, however, proved to be the case. Almost immediately following publication, critics entered the lists with a degree of energy, and indeed bitterness, that surprises us today. But there should be no reason for surprise. Inasmuch as *The Tragedy* is the most concentrated, the most direct frontal assault in literature upon the question "What is the purpose of human life" it is a literary work that "really matters." Indeed, it mattered so much that in 1883, the National Theater in Budapest turned the work that Madách subtitled a "dramatic poem" into a poetic drama, and since that year *The Tragedy of Man* has led a double life in the study and on the stage.

This double life sets the translator the terms of his task. He must, on the one hand, convey the emotional intensity and propulsive momentum that makes *The Tragedy* so stageworthy; on the other hand, he must also mirror as faithfully as he can those close-knit philosophical meditations and arguments that make this verse drama so attractive in the study. So far as the latter goes, any effort to paraphrase or to loosen the tight fabric of these frequently lengthy set pieces would result in trivialization. In addition, the translator must also face the fact that some of *The Tragedy* is closer to Hugo than to Ibsen. He must do his best to make acceptable to the contemporary English reader dramatic situations and linguistic gestures that are rooted in the Romantic Era, and he must do so without resorting to heavy-handed "adaptation."

Of the four major personæ of *The Tragedy*—the Lord, Adam, Eve, and Lucifer—it is surely Adam who poses the translator the heaviest challenge. The Lord is given fewer than 80 lines, though the last line of the work—arguably the most famous line in all Hungarian literature—belongs to him; more importantly, the Lord does not participate in the action and, accordingly, he and his language remain free of emotional coloring. Nor, as a rule, does the language of Eve present major problems. Characterized as one who lives the life of emotion, Eve is, so to speak, too busy living to give voice to what we today would call "exalted sentiments." As for Lucifer, that embodiment of destructive rationalism, more often than not he speaks the language of the philosophical skeptic, whose tone of voice is scaled from the coolly analytical to the mordantly cynical. Here, as I said above, the task is to keep the translation from becoming prolix. But Adam is

different. The bearer of that large-scaled, heroic optimism that we associate with the Romantic Age, Adam is the struggling Byronic idealist who moves from age to age, from one social order to another, indefatigably searching for the perfect historic embodiment of human brotherhood. In the course of his search, he resorts again and again to a vocabulary marked by words like "grand," "exalted," "radiant," "pure," "sacred," "noble," and so on. Such Shelleyesque verbal countets may well be off-putting to the contemporary English reader. Yet, for a translator to edit such words out of Adam's lines would be to destroy Madách's protagonist. And along with Adam, us too. For insofar as we become caught up in the work, we accept Adam as the surrogate for all of us, and his struggles become ours. I have therefore retained the essential features of Adam's language, letting the chips fall where they may.

Which, in turn, inevitably leads me to the endlessly vexed question of fidelity to one's original—fidelity to its lexical elements (a matter that is only relatively simple), fidelity to its style (a dauntingly complex business), fidelity to its spirit (assuredly, a *quodlibet* topic), and fidelity to its what-ever-else-you-please. Clearly, what to one translator is close fidelity is to another a slavish literalness, and what to one is a desirable paraphrase is to another an inexcusable exercise in willful self-indulgence. Sailing between the Scylla of a word-by-word rendering and the Charybdis of free invention is no easy task. Suffice it to say, I had no wish to "improve" my original either by eliminating some of its larger-than-life language, or by trying to "update" things that may strike some readers as out of date. Whenever I found it desirable to render a passage literally, I did so—and that was more often than not. More specifically, I tried, above all, to follow the cadences of Madách's lines, hoping thereby to mirror in English the weight (or the rapidity), the beat, the tension—indeed, the life—of my Hungarian original. I did, however, allow myself one major departure from my model. *The Tragedy* consists of a total of 4,114 lines, most of it in blank verse; a little more than 600 lines, however, are rhymed. Most of these 600-odd lines are so arbitrarily embedded in the basic blank verse and are so unstressed as rhymes that readers who do notice them wonder what significance they are meant to have. I have concluded that they have no special significance and, accordingly, I did not render such lines into rhymed English. On the other hand, some of the other rhymed passages (e.g., the Angelic Choir in Scenes 1 and 15, the opening and closing of the London Scene (Scene 11), or the songs in the Roman scene (Scene 6) are so important as *rhymed* moments that not to have rendered them as such would have amounted to a form of betrayal.

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Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado

Thomas R. Mark