

INTRODUCTION

Imre Madách and The Tragedy of Man

The Tragedy of Man is the most controversial work in the long history of Hungarian literature. When it was first published in January 1862, it was hailed as a great achievement, but at the same time it gave rise to a multitude of questions, both literary and philosophical, that have been fiercely debated ever since. It is also one of the most surprising works in Hungarian: it appeared suddenly from the pen of an unknown author and had no obvious antecedents in the Hungarian literary tradition. Moreover there is nothing, apart from a passing reference to Hunyadi in Scene 14, to brand it as Hungarian—a unique phenomenon at a time when Madách's contemporaries were agonizing over the failure of the revolution of 1848 and its repercussions on national life and expectations. How then did a Hungarian country gentleman who spent most of his short life at home and rarely travelled outside his native county come to write a dramatic poem that takes its place in a broad European tradition represented by such giant figures as Milton, Goethe, Byron and Ibsen?

There is no straightforward answer, for Madách left no diary and no early drafts of his work. Only one manuscript of *The Tragedy of Man* has survived, together with a scrap of paper indicating a running total of lines in each scene, the names and number of characters and the dates between which he wrote it. His earlier unpublished works and correspondence provide a few clues to his thought, but his family and narrow circle of friends had no idea of what he was writing in the 'Lion's Den', as he called his study, between 17 February 1859 and 26 March 1860. His home was in the small village of Alsósztrégova, now Dolná Strehová, Slovakia, which lies in the foothills of the Carpathians only sixty miles due north of Budapest as the crow flies, but light-years away from the capital in all other respects. The county of Nógrád in which it lies was renowned in the nineteenth century for its sleepy conservatism, decaying estates and the impoverished and eccentric gentry so admirably described in the stories of Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910), himself a native of the area. Alsósztrégova had been the seat of the Madách family for centuries when Imre Madách was born there in 1823, the third child and eldest son in a family of five. His home, a modest neo-classical mansion set in an extensive park, was then new, built by his grandfather to replace the 'old castle' which still dominated

the village. The older Lutheran and newer Catholic churches both contain Madách memorials, for the same grandfather had reconverted to Catholicism. Madách's father died in 1834, leaving his determined widow to manage the scattered estate of some 9,500 acres and bring up her large family, which she did with strict economy, for the estate was heavily in debt, but also with due regard to the social conventions of the age. The children were thus educated at home by a succession of tutors, their mother's French companion and visiting teachers of art, music and dancing. The house contained a large and wide-ranging library of books mainly in German, but also including works in Latin, French and Hungarian, both classical and contemporary. This remained a civilized haven for Imre Madách, whose health was always poor; he devoted much of his time to reading.

In 1837 Imre and his two younger brothers were sent to Pest to continue their education there; they were accompanied by a tutor and a housekeeper who maintained the strict economy they had known at home. Imre was to pursue the legal studies then customary among the country gentry. But he found himself in the exhilarating atmosphere of a city full of ideas concerning reform, and it was the youth who were discussing and promoting them. In a country where literature played the part of the opposition in a democratic parliament, there were new and outspoken ventures in writing and what was to become the National Theatre had just opened. Madách soon became friends with fellow-students who later became political leaders; he joined in eager debates, fell in love for the first time and turned his hand to romantic lyric and drama. Three of his poems appeared in 1839 in the literary journal *Honművész* and in 1840 he published at his own expense a volume of 26 poems entitled *Lantvirágok* (Lyre Blossoms) for his relatives and friends. The theme of this book is his hopeless love for Etelke Lónyay, the sister of one of his friends, yet it is dutifully dedicated to his mother, who strongly disapproved of the attachment, since Etelke was a Protestant. The poems display little else but a talent for imitation, but a letter of the same year reveals a depth of feeling and maturity of thought unusual in a teenage youth.¹

Madách returned home in 1840 to enter the legal service of his county while continuing his studies. There he was popular, though his career was interrupted by visits to spas to seek relief from the heart and respiratory troubles that plagued him. He turned again to writing, this time in the form of drama. He wrote several plays on Hungarian historical themes, cumbersome in structure and awkward in language, none of which were published or reached the stage. There was also a new cycle of love-poems to Lujza Dankó, who died of tuberculosis in 1843, but once again these display more the results of his familiarity

with the romantic idiom of his age than original talent. Much more intriguing is an essay on art which reveals his deep knowledge of Greek drama, an unusual accomplishment in a country where classical studies are generally restricted to Latin, and one shared with his contemporary and later mentor János Arany.

In his daily life Madách, who returned from Pest full of reforming zeal, encountered the frustrations of the backward-looking and cumbersome administration of his home county and was delighted to find a like-minded friend and lifelong confidant, Pál Szontágh. Their correspondence sheds light on Madách's otherwise reserved character. There was a latent satirical streak in him which was encouraged by Szontágh's ironic wit. One by-product of their association was a collection of epigrams on the county administrators, including themselves. Madách is characterized thus:

You're a liberal now, with good connections and learning;
That's why you hold your little snub nose so high.
Just wait a bit till you're the deputy lieutenant of Nógrád;
Your principles will melt away—and you'll still hold your nose up high.²

It was probably Szontágh who introduced Madách to journalism, inspiring him to write a series of critical articles on county affairs for the influential newspaper *Pesti Hírlap*. Here he cloaked his radicalism under the pseudonym "Timon", borrowed from the French publicist Cormenin-Timon, whose work he admired. But in the county assembly he spoke openly on free trade, the reform of the electoral system and the abolition of the death penalty, themes current in Pest but hardly appreciated in Nógrád. In 1843 ill-health forced him to resign his post as deputy notary, whereupon he was accorded the title of county court judge. He continued to write, though none of his poems, short stories or dramas was published then. Only one play, *Csak tréfa* (Just a Joke), is of interest as revealing his perpetual struggle as a radical against the pettiness and servility he found around him. Otherwise, at most his activity shows his interest in dramatizing history and evaluating the role of women in society.

In 1844 he met his future wife Erzsébet Fráter at a county ball. He was in the depths of depression, and she seemed to him to lift him out of himself. He fell madly in love with her and courted her despite warnings from his friend Pál Szontágh and the objections of his mother, who pointed out that she was flirtatious, of lesser rank and, what was more, a Protestant too. At that time she was seventeen, a lively and passionate girl who was also highly neurotic. The marriage took place in 1845, and the young couple made their home some twenty miles away in the village of Csesztve; their estate was still Madách property, but ironically part of the disapproving mother's dowry. At first all was happi-

ness. Although their first son died in infancy, three more children, a boy and two girls, were born to them. But tensions began to develop; Erzsébet did not share her husband's frugal tastes and love of learning. She proved moody and extravagant. Matters became worse when the revolution of 1848 broke out and Madách became involved in it. In 1846 he had been elected to the post of chief commissar for the county, in peacetime a sinecure. But in time of war it involved arranging supplies for troops stationed in the county, a considerable task in an area of poor communications. Apart from a brief spell in the spring of 1848 Madách, who was wholeheartedly on the side of the revolution, held this post throughout the conflict, despite his poor health. His two brothers also offered their services to the revolutionary government, and kept him well informed of events. Here at last the discussions and debates of earlier years had given place to action, and hopes ran high. But tragedy soon struck, both nationally and personally. Not only did the revolution fail, but the Madách family was shattered by the death of Imre's brother Pál, a dispatch-carrier (whose features Madách incorporated in his painting of St. Sebastian in the Catholic church at Alsósztrégo), and then by the murder of his sister Mária and her second husband at the hands of bandits. They left a young son whom Imre was to bring up with his own family. Then the father of his surviving brother's fiancée was hanged, the penalty for serving in the Ministry of Finance of the revolutionary government, and his friend Pál Szontágh was sentenced to two years in prison.

The cumulative effect of these disasters was deep and lasting. In the poems he wrote at this time there are several pointers towards *The Tragedy of Man*. "Life is a struggle, death repose," he writes in one verse, which ends: "I may fall in the struggle, but never shall I make a deal with fate."³ And in a poem commemorating the death of his sister he has harsh words for the ingratitude of the masses when individual heroes sacrifice their all for them, a theme which recurs in the Athens scene in *The Tragedy of Man*.⁴ Madách himself was next to suffer for his part in the revolution and its aftermath. In 1851 he gave shelter to János Rákóczy, a distant relative who had been secretary to Kossuth and was under sentence of death. Rákóczy carelessly gave himself away but managed to escape from his pursuers, while Madách was arrested and imprisoned first in Pozsony (now Bratislava) and then in Pest. The revenues from his estates were also confiscated. Meanwhile his wife had to fend for herself and her family; her mother-in-law was unhelpful, as her increasingly desperate letters to her husband indicate. He returned home in August 1853 to discover that she had been unfaithful to him during his imprisonment and that his marriage was virtually in ruins. A further problem was that his mother had decided to hand over the

estate to her children; this meant that Imre Madách and his family moved back to Alsósztrégo, where his mother still lived in the 'old castle', offering endless possibilities for further family friction. His marriage finally broke down in 1854 when a divorce was agreed. Madách retained custody of his son and younger daughter, while his estranged wife went to her home with the elder daughter. This settlement did not last, since she was unable to provide properly for her daughter, and eventually the children were reunited in the Madách home.

Imre Madách now became increasingly withdrawn, devoting most of his time to reading and writing in the 'Lion's Den'. He maintained contact with a few local friends, notably Pál Szontágh and the two village clergymen; there were also further flirtations, duly recorded in verse. But his mood of despair at the fate of Hungary and at his own personal tragedy persisted. In this he was not alone. The wave of optimism that had preceded the revolution had given way to general self-questioning and doubt, against the background of harsh Austrian reprisals. How had things gone so wrong? Who was responsible? Above all, what was the future in store for the country? Other writers were seeking the answers to these problems in a sober reconsideration of the immediate past and a cautious glance at a necessarily gloomy future. This was the atmosphere in which Madách in his isolation pondered the ideas that eventually emerged in *The Tragedy of Man*. Once more there are clues in his poetry. *The Creation of Woman* depicts an Eve who "scatters blessings and curses" like her counterpart in the drama.⁵ His versification of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel not only shows that he had read Byron's *Cain*, but also indicates his own state of mind, for he makes "freezing intellect" the real murderer, and this is a phrase that, with variations, recurs in *The Tragedy of Man* where Lucifer's rationalism repeatedly dashes down Adam's romantic idealism.⁶ Two letters in verse to Pál Szontágh also betray his mood: the first, dated 11 August 1856, contains an attack on marriage, while the second, of 7 February 1857, is a terrible cry of despair,⁷ on the draft of which he wrote, "I have re-read the poison poured out for Pál. Why haven't I kept it to myself? Why not? This poison is the truth, even if it's tragedy too, and human nature has never denied itself, and Adam from the time of creation onwards keeps appearing in different guises, yet basically he remains the same feeble worm at the side of the even feebler Eve."⁸

Such evidence as this demonstrates how Madách was gradually putting his own tragedy into a much wider setting and trying to draw general conclusions from it. His reading included epics dealing with the fate of mankind and contemporary works on the advance in natural sciences and the philosophy behind them. Works on social progress, biological determinism and entropy (fore-

shadowing the cooling-down of the sun and the degradation of the universe) all formed part of his studies. The only clues to his reading at this time, apart from those found in *The Tragedy of Man* itself, are scraps of paper on which he noted quotations and ideas, both his own and those of others, that intrigued him. These cover an immense range, but how deeply he read is another matter. Different philosophical concepts jostle each other throughout his work, as do different scientific ideas, while the Phalanstery scene interprets Fourier's work in a way that its author would not have recognized.

Before he completed *The Tragedy of Man* Madách wrote yet another play, totally different from any of his other works. *A civilizátor* (The Civilizer) is a short Aristophanic comedy presenting a sharply satirical view of the post-revolutionary political scene in Hungary. It displays a new-found dramatic skill based on a good knowledge of Greek comedy, and is of particular interest here as a demonstration of his ability to break away from Hungarian literary traditions. Not surprisingly its theme made it unpublishable, but it deserves recognition as an indication of the mood of the period and as a document of its age.

Of the actual writing of *The Tragedy of Man* there are no records or reminiscences. When it was complete, Madách set it aside and soon began work on a new Biblical drama, *Mózes*, in which the hero is once again confronted by the ungrateful masses. Later he read *The Tragedy of Man* to his friend Szontágh, who suggested some emendations and urged him to send it to János Arany, at that time the most influential figure in the Hungarian literary world, for an expert opinion. Meanwhile Madách came out of his retirement to play an active role in politics, as if the completion of his dramatic poem had helped him to come to terms with himself. He was elected a member of the Diet, where his few speeches revealed him as a thoughtful and effective orator. While in the capital he sent *The Tragedy of Man* to Arany, who glanced briefly at it, noted some infelicities of language and prosody in the first few pages and put it aside in the belief that it was a poor imitation of Goethe's *Faust*. But in May 1861, after the enthusiastic reception of a speech by Madách on the constitutional position of Hungary, Arany was persuaded to look once again at the manuscript. He discovered that his earlier opinion had been mistaken; his enthusiasm grew until finally he wrote to Madách offering his help with improvements in vocabulary and versification, all with the aim of rapid publication. Madách was delighted; he confessed that he would have burnt his work if Arany's opinion had been negative. So the first edition, with Arany's emendations, was published in January 1862 (though dated 1861), and it brought immediate fame to Madách. Literary honours were heaped on him, but at the same time he was

subjected to severe criticism, the precursor of the controversies which still continue. Some of the first critics questioned details, which induced Madách to correct them for the second edition of 1863. This is now accepted as the standard text.

Madách continued to write. He completed his play on Moses and submitted it for a prize, but it was rejected. Some of his earlier poetry was published, and he was assembling a collection of it when death came on 5 October 1864. His reputation therefore rests solely on *The Tragedy of Man*.

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The structure of Madách's dramatic poem—he did not call it a drama, though its conception is dramatic—is straightforward. Of the fifteen scenes, the first three are Biblical, set in heaven, paradise and outside paradise respectively. Scenes 4 to 14 contain Adam's visions: the first four of them are rooted in ancient and medieval history, from Egypt to Byzantium, then follow three linked scenes set in Prague with a forward vision of the French Revolution. The last historical scene depicts contemporary London. Scenes 12 to 14 deal with the future and end of humankind, separated by an attempt to escape from earth into space. The final scene reverts to the place outside paradise as Adam wakes from his dream.

The first three scenes follow a pattern familiar to readers of Genesis and *Paradise Lost*, but with subtle variations to suit Madách's purposes. Lucifer is established as a sarcastic critic of the creation and is allowed not one but two trees in Paradise, those of knowledge and immortality; these, he confidently believes, will enable him to work on Adam and wreck the divine order. He tempts both Adam and Eve to eat of the first tree, but they are prevented from sampling the second and driven out of paradise. The third scene sees them nostalgically attempting to construct a new life outside paradise, and Adam demands that Lucifer keep his promise to impart knowledge. He wishes to know the fate of mankind, as indeed does Eve. The result is a fearsome vision of the physical and chemical processes governing the earth (as known to mid-nineteenth-century scientists), which scares Adam, since he cannot cope with them. Lucifer then summons the Spirit of the Earth to protect Adam and Eve, but instead of the gentle youth he had known in heaven, he is a terrifyingly powerful figure in his own sphere and only partially to be known to humans. Adam then demands to know why he suffers and what the meaning of suffering can be, so Lucifer puts him and Eve to sleep in order to dream the future. Here it is worth noting that the action is triggered by thirst for knowledge, not the disobedience of *Paradise Lost*. And it is significant that Lucifer, well aware

of the tribulations that lie ahead, allows Adam and Eve a tiny ray of light called Hope, offering an escape from the despair which concludes each scene.

The next four scenes establish the pattern of all Adam's visions, the pursuit of an ideal which is shattered. In Egypt he appears as a youthful despot yearning for eternal fame at whatever human cost. Faced with an individual example of that cost—and with Eve—he is brought to realize the vanity of his hopes and determines to work for a democratic ideal. But in the home of democracy, Athens, he is the hero Miltiades, now misrepresented and condemned to death by the fickle masses who have been roused against him by demagogues. Eve, as his wife, curses them, and he tells Lucifer to take him to some new place where, away from lofty ideals, he can pursue a sensual life. The scene changes to Rome, where he enjoys the profligate pleasures of a young patrician against a background of death and pestilence. He grows dissatisfied, and when the apostle Peter prophesies the destruction of such a degenerate society and preaches a new ideal of brotherhood, he seeks a new world of chivalrous virtues where woman too shall be exalted. He is transported to Constantinople at the time of the Crusades. As Tancred, the leader of a troop of Crusaders returning wearily from Asia, he finds that the ideals for which he has fought have turned sour; Christians are engaged in hair-splitting petty disputes and charges of heresy fly thick and fast. Eve, who appeared in Rome as a prostitute, is now a noble woman; despite Adam's deep love for her she is compelled to enter a convent, not of her own volition but because of her father's vow. As at the end of the Athens scene, Adam desires to get away from the masses and rest, his ideals shattered once again.

In each of these scenes he is a heroic figure who parries Lucifer's often sarcastic challenges. The confrontation between them is to be seen as an argument in Madách's own mind between romantic ideals and cold logic, and to this end he takes considerable liberties with historical fact. Miltiades, for example, was not executed, nor were the Crusades, the debate on the nature of Christ and the selling of indulgences contemporaneous. Madách's approach to history is that of the good epic poet; he would have subscribed to Arany's theory of 'epic credibility', the poet's right to adapt history for his own purposes, provided that the result is credible in the eyes of the reader.

The following three scenes mark a change. Adam is now older. He leads a life of contemplation as Kepler, the Astronomer Royal in Prague. But he is forced to divide his activities between the real science of astronomy and the false one of astrology in order to please his master, the Emperor Rudolf, and his extravagant and unfaithful wife, who cannot understand his attachment to scholarship. He longs to know more of the eternal laws of science which will eventu-

ally bring a new age to sweep away the 'worn-out lumber' of the world he inhabits. He is vouchsafed a sudden vision of the future: the French Revolution has indeed swept away the old world, and Adam as Danton once more faces the masses, who are thirsting for blood. He attempts to save the life of Eve, the sister of a young aristocrat, but she is killed, to reemerge as a woman of the masses who has killed a conspirator and demands her reward—to spend a night with the great Danton. As he begins to recognize, to his horror, the features of the young aristocrat's sister in her, another mob enters to denounce him, and he goes to the scaffold after prophesying that Robespierre, his accuser, will follow him within three months. He wakes again in Prague, to reflect on his horrible vision and to instruct a pupil in the limitations of science—a scene superficially reminiscent of the dialogue between Mephistopheles and the student in *Faust*. Abstract theory is deadening; independence of thought and freedom of speech are the real goal.

These three linked scenes are by far the most personal ones in *The Tragedy of Man*, indeed some critics have been led to believe that they were written as part of a different work. Adam, the scholar and recluse, is close to Madách's heart, and Eve is clearly modelled on his wife. Moreover the role of Lucifer is reduced almost to extinction. The vision of the tarnished ideals of the French Revolution and the role in it of the masses is prompted by the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and its failure. Revolution in itself was not evil in Madách's eyes; his political pronouncements provide evidence of his longing for a new revolution in Hungary.⁹

Scene 11 is set in Dickensian London, where Adam and Lucifer observe from the Tower the bustle of a large market. This is the world of free competition, where everything has its price and values have become corrupted and debased. Eve appears as a girl whose mother seeks a good marriage for her, and sharply rejects Adam's advances when they first meet, for he is dressed as a workman; when, however, she is led to believe that he is a rich man in disguise, she welcomes him. The rich oppress the poor and even the beggars quarrel. Adam is disillusioned once again, and demands to be led to a place where intellect rules, but before this happens the scene is transformed into a macabre dance of death round an open grave into which all the characters leap. Eve alone is saved, the eternal woman led on by love, poetry and youth to the skies. Thus Madách, in by far the most colourful and kaleidoscopic scene, ends his historical survey of the progress and failure of mankind with the grim prospect of a whole society digging its own grave. If there are overtones of Hogarth in this scene it is not surprising, since one of his caricatures hung in the house at Alsósztrégo.

The last three visions move away from history to the future. The first of these is inspired by the work of the Abbé Charles Fourier, who envisaged socialist communities of some two thousand people living together in a Phalanstery, directed by scientific knowledge, and working peacefully and happily together for the common good. Madách, however, adopts Fourier's framework without his vision. Adam and Lucifer, as visiting scientists, are introduced to a world where initiative and individuality have given place to total uniformity, and all who step out of line are punished. Among these Adam recognizes Plato, Luther and Michelangelo. Only what is deemed useful to society is permitted, so there is no room for art and poetry. Since human life on the earth has a limited future, a scientist is trying to create life, but his experiment is shattered by the Spirit of the Earth. Now Eve appears as a mother whose children are due to be taken from her to be trained according to the rules of the community. She protests, and Adam defends her, finally offering to marry her, but this is against the scientific principles governing the Phalanstery: love has no place in this environment. Adam and Lucifer leave this inhumane world of intellect to reappear in space, flying rapidly away from the earth, doomed as it is to cool down. But this too is disastrous, since man cannot exist there in a world of spirits and God has forbidden it. The Spirit of the Earth recalls Adam, and after a brief attempt at resistance he demands to return, for life with all its suffering is better than annihilation. Lucifer tries hard to dissuade him, recalling his failures in previous incarnations, but Adam is determined:

I know that I will fail and fail again.
I don't care. After all, what is the goal?
It is the end of an honourable contest.
The goal is death, but life consists of struggle.
The struggle in itself must be the goal.

So Lucifer takes him to earth in its last days, when only a few degenerate Eskimos are struggling for existence. Adam is now old and crippled, yet he and Lucifer are regarded as gods and implored to send more seals and fewer humans into the world. Adam is horrified to recognize Eve in the wife of an Eskimo, and asks Lucifer to release him from his dreams.

The final scene finds Adam outside paradise once more, bewildered and broken by his visions of the future. Lucifer tempts him to defy God by committing suicide, for this will prevent them from becoming reality. As he prepares to do so, Eve tells him that she is to be a mother, thus frustrating his purpose; she also foresees the birth of another child who will bring brotherhood on earth. Now Adam submits to God in words reminiscent of those of Job, and Lucifer angrily realizes that he has lost the battle. The Lord appears in glory, and Adam

plies him with questions which, however, remain unanswered. Eve is to be his guardian and companion, while Lucifer's icy intellect is to act as leaven to foment rebellion in him, though not for all time. The work ends with the Lord's injunction to Adam to strive on (thus confirming Adam's realization in the space scene that life is a struggle and the struggle itself is the goal) and to have faith.

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Madách did not live long enough to reply to the numerous questions that critics raised when *The Tragedy of Man* was published. Nevertheless there are two letters which offer a glimpse of the way in which his mind was working. The first was addressed to János Erdélyi, who had written a lengthy criticism in consecutive numbers of the short-lived political daily *Magyarország*.¹⁰ Erdélyi accused him of pessimism, particularly in his account of utopian socialism and in his insistence on the decline of humankind. What Madách had written was rather *The Comedy of the Devil* than *The Tragedy of Man*. Madách replied:

Your accusation suggests that I was trying to make socialism an object of scorn. The fundamental idea of my whole work is intended to be this: when man breaks away from God and begins to act relying on his own strength, he pursues this course through a succession of the greatest and most sacred ideas of mankind. True, he fails everywhere, and what causes his failure everywhere is a weakness that lurks in the innermost recesses of human nature; he is powerless to shake it off (in my humble opinion, this would be tragedy) but, though in his despair he believes that all his efforts so far have drained his energy, his development has always continued to go ahead; humanity has conquered even if the struggling individual has not recognized this, and the guiding hand of divine providence makes up for the human weakness he cannot overcome by himself. It is to this that the "Strive on and trust" of the last scene refers. Then I have tried to arrange the separate scenes or circumstances consecutively, in such a way that they follow each other as if from psychological necessity as far as *one particular* protagonist is concerned. Maybe I have not succeeded in doing this at all, indeed I fear so. I merely want to make the point that when you accuse me of mocking socialism you may also accuse me of doing the same with liberty, Christianity, learning, free trade and all those ideas in each part that I have chosen deliberately because I regard them to be the main features in the development of mankind. This is how I regard socialist ideas too, and that is why I have included them in one scene. It is true that Adam fails in each one. But he fails because of the intangible weaknesses that exist in his nature and that only the hand of God can make up for; the idea continues to develop, it becomes victorious and is ennobled. In all this my aim has simply been to rescue my intentions in your eyes; I wanted to rehabilitate the man in me, certainly not the artist. I would rather have written a bad *Tragedy of Man* in which I have not succeeded in stressing great and sacred ideas than a good *Comedy of the Devil* in which I held them up to ridicule.¹¹

The second letter was to Károly Szász, many of whose critical observations led Madách to make changes in the text of the second edition of *The Tragedy of Man*. Szász asked him why he had omitted the Reformation, which surely counted as an important stage in the history of mankind. Madách wrote:

I entirely agree with you, indeed this truth occurred to me while I was writing, but I decided that in the tragedy I could not make use of the Reformation as something that conquered, for if I had used it I should also have been compelled to end with the same sort of disillusionment as in the other scenes; in other words it would not have suited my purpose.¹²

These comments demonstrate the working of Madách's mind as he wrote, and it is interesting to note that his reply to Erdélyi shows yet again his knowledge of Greek tragedy in which the hero has an inherent weakness. But many problems remain unanswered, among them Madách's negative view of the role of the masses (and here it is important to note that they are not to be identified with any particular social class), or the relationship between the three main characters. Why does Lucifer's role suddenly diminish in the Prague and Paris scenes, and why are Eve's reincarnations so inconstant? The confrontations between Adam and Lucifer, as already suggested, reflect the arguments in Madách's own mind between the idealist whose faith had been severely shaken by the tragedies he had endured and the well-read rationalist whose satirical and potent reasoning nevertheless fails to break his questing spirit. The Lord's instructions to Lucifer in the last scene suggest that the arguments are to continue, but under the watchful eye of divine providence. Eve may be seen as an embodiment of Madách's experience of woman as a disappointment and an ideal—and it is the latter who finally accompanies Adam into history; here she has much in common with Milton's Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*. She is also based on much study, for Madách had long been interested in the role of women. When elected to the Hungarian Academy he chose as the subject of his inaugural lecture (which he was too ill to deliver) 'Woman, particularly from the aesthetic point of view'; in it the references ranging from Lao-Tzu and Homer to contemporary European authors demonstrate both his fascination for the subject and his breadth of reading. It would be wrong to limit his portrayal of Eve to his own experience of a dominating mother, a neurotic wife and several flirtations.

Madách's insistence on the progress of humanity despite repeated failure, so emphatically reiterated in his letter to Erdélyi, and his inclusion in the drama of the tiny ray of hope—how he would have appreciated that once popular picture of Hope by G. F. Watts—suggest a possible link with Hungarian tradition. The poet Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855), himself troubled by the contrast

between idealism and reality, reflected on the problem in his sombre poem 'Thoughts in the Library' (1844). After a catalogue of failures, he writes:

And yet, and yet we must strive.
A new spirit begins to win its way,
A new direction breaks through men's souls.

and later:

What is our task in the world? To struggle
And give nourishment to our souls' desires.

This he repeats with a variation:

What is our task in the world? To struggle
For the noblest aims as our strength permits.¹³

Like his contemporary Arthur Hugh Clough, Madách believed that the struggle was not in vain.

The last scene has probably caused more controversy than anything else in *The Tragedy of Man*. Why, after the long succession of failures in Adam's dream, should there not be a pessimistic conclusion? Here it must be remembered that the end of the work is the beginning of history, and that Madách had selected his material carefully so that each scene would end in disillusion; as his letter to Szász indicates, he had not included significant events in the history of mankind that did not fit his plan. And in Madách's own time there was ample evidence of the progress of man; if this was less obvious in post-revolution Hungary, it was nevertheless clear in the rest of Europe, which is where Madách's reading took him; the scraps of paper containing his thoughts and aphorisms show his preoccupation with the subject. The fact that the Lord leaves Adam's questions unanswered is a reason for him to strive further, and he has been shown to possess an ever-questing spirit even at the time of his worst failures. Moreover in the last scene he regains the favour of the Lord and is given Eve as a guide. All these are reasons for optimism. If there is an ultimate aim for mankind, it would appear to be brotherhood (the 'fraternity' of the French Revolution), and this is foreseen by Eve when she refers to the birth of Christ. There is then something to strive for under the guiding hand of divine providence, a message consistent with the Catholic teaching that Madách had long before assimilated, though without the mention of redemption.

Thus *The Tragedy of Man* is very much a product of its age, a time of doubts and developments that led to re-examination of previously held beliefs. It reflects one man's attempt to think through the confusion that surrounded him. The result is a mosaic of ideas, not a consistent philosophical scheme, gleaned

from a variety of recognizable sources but fused together in his mind. Sometimes the burden of the ideas is almost beyond Madách's capacity to express them and his imagination fails to match them. When he tries to be dramatic, his weaknesses become only too evident; his powers of invention are limited and his characters tend to be stereotypes borrowed from his reading. But there are moments of beauty—Eve's brief speech at the end of the London scene is one of them—and of great drama. Madách is at his best in kaleidoscopic scenes like those set in Constantinople and London.

Although Madách describes *The Tragedy of Man* as a dramatic poem, he envisaged it as a play, with suitable stage directions. The problems of producing what is in effect a series of consecutive scenes without a development of the plot are considerable. The highly compressed arguments are difficult enough to read and, indeed, re-read, and tend to be lost at a single hearing on the stage. Moreover the sudden changes of scene and the inclusion of supernatural elements present formidable technical problems. Nevertheless *The Tragedy of Man* was first staged in Budapest in 1883 and has become part of the permanent repertory of the Hungarian theatre, allowing producers ample scope for ingenuity. It has also been performed with great success in Prague (where the French Revolution scene was received so enthusiastically that the Austrian authorities promptly banned it in 1892), Vienna and the German-speaking lands, Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, Estonia and the Soviet Union; a puppet version was performed in Paris in 1937, and it has also been broadcast in various European countries and the United States. It is on record that Beerbohm Tree had plans to stage *The Tragedy of Man* at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1899, but nothing came of them.

Madách would have been astonished at the lasting interest evinced in the work he conceived in the isolation of Alsósztrégova, as well as at the flood of books and articles that offer new interpretations and comments. The fact that *The Tragedy of Man* continues to fascinate and provoke new generations is an indication of both its greatness and its relevance in an ever-changing world.¹⁴

G. F. CUSHING