

Summary of Doctoral Dissertation entitled

The Tragedy of Man and the antinomy of contemporary criticism

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I. The aim of research

The contemporary history of criticism is a blank spot in the map of special literature on Madách. Some dealt with the problem in monograph and a treatise on the reception of the first publication also came to light but nobody undertook to write an overall evaluation and interpretation. It is only the full survey that can provide the readers with a real image of the reception of the dramatic poem. Posterity paid attention only to two pieces of writing out of nine: the tribute to János Arany and the study of János Erdélyi between twentieth of January and third of September 1862. The essays of the other seven contributors fell into oblivion although not short accounts but extensive, wide-ranging evaluations were written by the famous aestheticians and critics of the period apart from Greguss' and Vajda's fast pieces of news. Károly Zilahy returned to Madách's piece of work twice, Károly Szász praised the *Tragedy* in a separate volume, Szevér Reviczky and the most edifying contemporary criticism, Kronosz having been unknown till today, was against the unacceptably despairing piece of work in five series of studies consisting of five parts. On the other hand the anonymous publicist of "*Családi Kör*" painted the poet's hagiography by rewriting the content of *Tragedy*– this way giving a start to the literary cult of Madách. Perhaps it is the imperfect survey of contemporary documents that explains the mistake which Madách research has had for more than one hundred years and which has made an ironic consensus between civic and later Marxist reviews of criticism. The contradictions of contemporary views were of rather aesthetic than ideological nature. The critical, hermeneutical approach to criticism, however, has brought a completely different result: in the studies on *Tragedy* very short parts were devoted to "aesthetic" remarks, to criticism referring to the structure of the dramatic poem, to its characters and language. This imperfection is surprising from three aspects. One of them is an aesthetic-historic aspect. In the middle of the 19th century the dictionary of this discipline was extended, the sphere of concepts was full, art criticism did

not use only basic counter-terms, but they also used transitory aesthetic qualities connecting them. Still none of them appear in the contemporary criticism of *Tragedy*. On the other hand the lack of aesthetic notions is strange, because the authors are the theory writers of the first great period in Hungarian history of aesthetics. Arany's, Greguss's and Erdélyi's literary aesthetic work is well-known, of the members of opposition Károly Zilahi's studies are the most significant, but Szevér Reviczky's epic criticism and János Vajda's drama criticism are of theoretical depth as well as the member of Gyulai-circle, Károly Szász's pieces of literary translation work. In the end: ideological emotions overshadowing arguments on aesthetics in the studies on *Tragedy* are unusual even in the history of criticism, because in the age of absolutism literary criticism became sober and theoretical, the irrevocable opinions and "finalised facts" of the reform period had been corrected and supervised. The circle of Pál Gyulai and Szende Riedl tried to approach the literary pieces of work mainly in the language of aesthetics and based on the theories of normative-contextual criticism.

The present dissertation proves that the main token of the ideological character of the special literature on *Tragedy*, the political-denominational treatise did not get prevailing at about the turn of the century, after Pál Gyulai's publishing the poet's first complete works (1880), but this phenomenon is the same age as the history of the dramatic poem's reception.

II. Research method

The dissertation attempts at the hermeneutical analysis of the contemporary *Tragedy* – criticism based on close reading, the aim of which is – on one hand – to make a survey on the critical, theoretical and aesthetic-historical background behind the texts. On the other hand it uses the theory of explanatory communities when it argues that the first speakers of *Tragedy*'s history of criticism were led by overt or covert ideological aims: the publicists of "literary Deák-party" and those of the Opposition wanted to vindicate their ideological political value and interest-system. Though in the contemporary criticisms of *Tragedy* theoretical-ideological aims lost their importance compared to aesthetical criteria, the aesthetical objections also need explanations, and that is the reason why the paper also examines how some criticisms can be fitted into the evolution of Hungarian literary aesthetics. A surprising consensus was formed between the two opponents: following Arany all contemporary critics of the dramatic poem considered that Madách rather thinks than imagines; his poetic inspiration is far behind his philosophical mind. The main point in *consensus communis* is that it is the creator that speaks on behalf of all the actors and actresses and his constant "philosophical pressure" makes his characterisation unauthentic. Its reason was given mainly by Kronosz and Erdélyi: Madách left the "sacred way of tradition", he used the main source of frame colours; the *Bible*. This

critical tenet is examined in the last chapter of my dissertation, which based on Paul Ricoeur's explanatory theory analyses the antinomy of Biblical manners in the first scene of the *Tragedy*.

III. The results of the research

“We won, my friend, we have won so far and will win ever after.”- wrote the enthusiastic János Arany to Madách after he had read the first four scenes of the *Tragedy* at the Kisfaludy Society in October 1861. The year of publishing did not bring its present critical success, what is more, the “literary Deák-party” deserted its leader. The earlier enthusiastic supporters of the drama, such as Csengery, Gyulai, Toldy went silent in front of the public, but showed sceptical about the work in their private letters. If we look at the overview of the history of criticism, it shows that it was the contemporary literary opposition that determined the reception of the *Tragedy*. According to the short – thus simplifying – summary there were more and longer analytic essays published of the dramatic poem by the members of Szende Riedl's circle than by the members of the Gyulai-circle who had led Madách into literary life. The picture shows quite a shift in proportion even if we take János Erdélyi's work on the *Tragedy* (arguably) as one that follows the philosophy of the Arany-circle. The publications of unknown analysts underline the statements above. The publicist of the “*Családi Kör*” praised the explorer and the publisher of the *Tragedy*, the Kisfaludy Society, but the highly educated Kronosz rejects the work of Madách in a five volume study. The analysis of the published criticisms however proves that the two parties exaggerated their conflict on aesthetics due to their ideological opposition. The general Shakespeare cult of the period served as a bridge between the critical expectations of the two parties. Vajda, Zilahy and Erdélyi all argued the aesthetic value of the drama. Their remarks show that they were looking for the dramaturgy of the English poet in Madách's work. The fact that Erdélyi transported his theories written in his earlier criticism on Vörösmarty, Petőfi and Czakó into his essay on *Tragedy* without any changes, throws new light upon his criticism. The parallel parts show that he disliked the genre of epic drama not only as an aesthete but also as a philosopher.

The thesis suggests that the ideological aim gaining more importance and the aim of aesthetics are in antinomy in the contemporary criticisms of the *Tragedy*. These texts became the propagandistic announcers of either an exclusive dogma, or a philosophical, political theory. Most of them had the aim of strengthening or weakening the reputation of a social institute, such as the Academy or the Kisfaludy Society. This ambition broke away from the

aesthetic judgement just like the latter from the world of the literary work. There grew an insurmountable gap between the ideological thoughts of the critics and the theory of art criticism. The “*Egy üdvözlő szó*” (*A Word of Welcome*) by János Arany had a defining impact on the later Madách-literature. Fearing from the negative affect of international literary comparisons he placed the value of the *Tragedy* from aesthetic to the “thought, the general human”. The welcome of Arany was pressurising and his praise became the start of a later typical topic transforming into an ideology in the Madách-literature. It wants to clear *The Tragedy of Man* from the false accusation of a pessimistic ideology. Arany’s aim changed from aesthetic to ideological though when he presumed that all other readings of the drama were wrong thus to be rejected. Arany as well reviewed the content of the last scene so that it can meet Christian interpretation. Ágost Greguss (and later Koronosz and Erdélyi) go even further down this road. He denies fight as an immanent value of the work by not mentioning or misinterpreting scene XIII. It prepares the theodician interpretation by the theological idealization of the transcendent sphere. Károly Szász, who is representing the “literary Deák-party” has the longest discussion of the work is led by cult-creating patriotism rather than aspects of literary aesthetics when he raises the *Tragedy* over *Faust*. The first appearance of religious chastisement comes with this essay. The Catholic Madách was led into the literary life by protestants (Arany, Greguss, Szász). The author misses the proper presentation of Protestantism from the historic scenes.

The literary opposition intended to write its criticism on the *Tragedy* in the spirit of the normative “*Kritikai Lapok*“. The ideological fight eventually swept away the normative critical principles of Szende Riedl. In their review János Vajda and Károly Zilahy are opposing to the position of the Kisfaludy Society, Arany and Gyulai as the leaders of criticism. The tension between the praise of Madách’s epic drama and its total rejection can be explained by the personal antipathy towards the opposite side in Vajda’s case, Zilahy is driven by jealousy and his anger against Károly Szász. A peculiar part of the contemporary reception of the *Tragedy* is Szevér Reviczky’s left wing “Russian” interpretation. The frame of the five volume work can be taken as the parody of Greguss’ and Szász’s praise, but this critic of tragic fate founded school with his analysis of the utopian scenes. He starts a long, passionate discussion with full of self contradictions about the idea of phalanstery. The comparative analysis of Revicky’s parallel written literary criticisms assumes that he was influenced by the spirit of Herzen. Ironically the most interesting documents of the contemporary reception of the *Tragedy* were written by unknown authors. The publicist of the “*Családi Kör*” not only changes the emphasis in his review such as Arany and Greguss had

done before, but also rewrites, alters the piece of art in favour of his theodician interpretation. He also draws the hagiography of Madách from evangelic allusions. The highly educated Kronosz approached the *Tragedy* with a conservative-clerical aspect, but his aim was totally different. Alluding to the ideal theodicy of Leibniz he made the denominational arguments exclusive and stated that *The Tragedy of Man* was the work of sin, and its author was a maladjusted fake prophet. The close reading of the contemporary criticism proves that the “literary Deák-party”, its opposition and the unknown publicists as well suppressed the points of aesthetics in favour of the ideological aims. Later, the discussion about the epic drama transformed to a notion, led to the labyrinth of antinomies. The thesis majorly deals with the *Tragedy* review of János Erdélyi. Its impact can only be compared to the *Welcome* by Arany and what makes it more important is that Madách only acknowledged this criticism and replied to Erdélyi in a private letter. The result of the thesis shows that the famous work contains surprisingly few original observations. The criticism of the utopist scenes became rather important in the work of Revicky and the theodician reading of history in the review of Kronosz. The analysis of the text separates the aesthetical and philosophical phrases that change rhapsodically in literary criticism. The alignment of the certain motives proves that Erdélyi was driven by ethical and ideological thoughts. He refuses the *Tragedy* because Madách mixed his philosophical reflexions with the conversations of biblical scenes that are alienated from the Christian traditions. The work as a whole in the meantime does not meet the requirements of poetry: it does not give comfort to the reader. The notional-ideological ending of the criticism reviews the earlier aesthetical statements: the dream scenes do not meet the optimal theodician approach of history. The trust - without belief or hope – at the end of the drama, leave the reader in the spiritual gap between the *Old-* and the *New Testaments*. Erdélyi could not resolve the contrast between the aesthetic and ideological points in his criticism of the *Tragedy*. On one hand he changed his analytic method while writing because the review focusing on the structure of meaning did not bring him results after several attempts. He could not identify the “core idea” of the epic drama. On the other hand he examines the work in the light of his philosophical inspiration, Hegel, but in the discussion with the idea of the utopian scenes he had to turn against the historicism of the aesthetic system of the German philosopher in order to push through his theodician arguments. The last chapter of the thesis is searching for the answer for the antinomy of the contemporary reviews and suggests that the cold reception and aesthetical hesitation can be explained with the contrastive conversations of the *Tragedy* in term of language use. The description of biblical styles of speech relies on the analytic theory of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur

districted five “discourses”. The analysis of the first scene proves that the ambivalent use of language is part of the author’s plan: the reflection of the „disharmonia praestabilita” on the language that is present all the way through the drama. The ambiguous mixing of the linguistic-notional levels of prophetic, narrative, ordering, philosophical and hymnal registers did not only lead to the antinomic use of language but also gave a little irony to the biblical characters. The linguistic-logical understanding of existence is limited because the state of being created is beyond language or gnosis in the *Tragedy*, its base has moral nature. It is the ethos that connects the biblical and historic scenes: we are compensated for the impossibility of answering the questions raised by our Earthly living through fighting for their understanding and the feeling of hope for the possibility that once we will understand.