„MORE OF SEALS"[38] – INUIT-REPRESENTATIONS IN *THE TRAGEDY OF MAN*

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I first met György Szőnyi in 1969, during university choir rehearsals. Though he was still a high school student, he was a welcome addition since we had fewer people for male parts than needed. Ever since, we have been sharing not only academic but also cultural interests and activities, including a passion for classical music, theatre, and disseminating information about Hungarian literary masterpieces to foreign audiences. In this short article, I wish to focus on a gem of Hungarian culture and its representation of a particular group in northern Canada.

Imre Madách (1823–1864) started to work on the final version of his 'dramatic poem' of humanity in his very remote home, Alsósztregova, in 1859, exactly ten years after the defeat of the Hungarian war of independence. The writer himself was actively participating in the war against Habsburg rule and was imprisoned for almost a whole year in various prisons after the defeat. It was in prison in 1853 that he started to work on what became *The Tragedy of Man,* writing two more versions in the second part of the 1850s.[1] Like most mid-19th-century Hungarian intellectuals, he was well-educated, spoke several foreign languages (German, French, English, Latin, Greek, Slovak), played the piano, studied painting, was active in sports and had a remarkable collection of books, including those by French and German philosophers like Charles Fourier, Kant, Hegel, Humboldt, Schopenhauer and others. He followed the main issues of his times, including the discourse about materialism and idealism.[2] One influential book on these topics was *Force and Matter* by Ludwig Büchner, published in 1855.

The Tragedy of Man is among the most precious works of Hungarian culture – a very complex one – provoking long discussions about its ideas on religion, society, human history as well as its 'stageability'. Dozens of monographs and scholarly articles are devot-

[38] Imre Madách, *The Tragedy of Man,* trans. George Szirtes, introd. George F. Cushing, ill. Mihály Zichy, 6th ed. (Budapest: Corvina, 2009), 267, 247 (hereafter referred to as *TM*).

[1] Madách Imre, *Az ember tragédiája: Drámai költemény. Szinoptikus kritikai kiadás.* kiad., jegyz. Kerényi Ferenc (Budapest: Argumentum, 2005), 807, 657, (hereafter referred to as *SzKK*).

[2] For more details about these influences, see Dieter P. Lotze, *Imre Madách* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 74–104.

ed to its analysis from various perspectives. It has been translated into several languages and has inspired many artists. Staging the fifteen scenes or playing one of the leading roles – Adam, Eve, Lucifer – have been the greatest challenges for theatre people in Hungary, and even abroad. The new National Theatre of Hungary was inaugurated with János Szikora's mise-en-scène of Madách's masterpiece on March 15th, 2002.

The structure of the play is anything but typical of the age when it was written. It is divided into fifteen scenes (no acts are indicated). The first is about Creation, the second is set in Paradise, the third, after the Fall, outside Eden, at the end of which Lucifer casts a spell on Adam and Eve: they "will see unto the end of time/ As in a dream, in fleeting images" (*TM,* 50). The scenes that follow depict milestones in human history – in Egypt, Greece, Rome of the antiquity, Constantinople, Prague, Paris, and London. Adam, the protagonist (although some critics argue that Lucifer is the main character), appears as a young Pharaoh, as Miltiades, as Sergiolus, the Roman nobleman, Tancred, the head of Crusaders, Kepler and Danton, while in 19th-century London he is Adam again, a "man of mature years" (*TM,* 171). Scene XII is set in a Phalanstery, Scene XIII in Space where Adam is a very old man. The penultimate scene shows "Eskimo-land"[3] with Adam as "a broken old man" (*TM,* 241), signifying the end of the dream. Scene XV leads us back to where the heroes fell asleep, outside Eden. It is Scene XI that is set in Madách's age: as in previous historical scenes, Adam is enthusiastic at the beginning ("This is the world I always hungered for", *TM,* 171) but the danse macabre at the end sobers him: he has to realize that capitalism and modern industry do not offer a solution to mankind's problems. The following three scenes – featuring Luther, Plato and Michelangelo deprived of their names and identified by numbers only – (the latter doomed to making chair legs at the Phalanstery), forecast future possibilities. In Scene XIII Adam and Lucifer are flying in space, the Spirit of the Earth reminding man about the limits of his choices. It is in the last scene of this sequence of pessimistic forecasts concerning the future that Adam finds himself in a "barren, mountainous landscape, covered in snow and ice ... The light is dim. In the foreground we see a few stunted birches, and, between a juniper and a dwarf pine, an Eskimo hut" (*TM,* 241).

As a researcher of the Canadian culture, I have a special interest in tracing what sources Madách could rely on when creating this important scene – I consider it important because the playwright refers to issues that now would be defined as 'environmental' and also because it is at the end of this very scene that Adam has to wake, since

[3] When speaking about the play by Madách I will use "Eskimo" – as it was generally accepted in Europe in the age of Madách – but I am fully aware that in our days this label is not accepted any more.

his dream into the future has reached its end-point. The whole play contains 4117 lines. This scene (XIV) has only 179 lines, so it is one of the shorter scenes (the longest one, 592 lines, is set in mid-19th-century London.) As in the other scenes, the main characters are Adam and Lucifer. An Eskimo appears later in the scene and, Eve, as the Eskimo's wife, appears at the very end to welcome the visitors.

Adam, an old man walking with a stick and discouraged by the cold, dark and snowy environment, asks Lucifer to lead him to sunny parts with palm trees. Lucifer explains to him that they are at the Equator, so Adam has to realize that the Earth is cooling down, it is but "a monstrous grave" (*TM,* 241) of humanity. The only survivor they can find is the Eskimo coming out of his tiny hut, ready to hunt seals. For Adam, he is a "stunted shape", a "strange deformity". He cannot accept that the Eskimo is "the heir to my estate" (*TM,* 243). The Eskimo, on the other hand, takes them for gods, but does not know if they are good or evil, so he wants to flee but Lucifer prevents his escape.

Eskimo *falling to his knees*
Have mercy on me!
I promise I will sacrifice to you
The first seal that I catch, if you don't hurt me.

Lucifer
What right have you to sacrifice the life
Of that poor seal in order to save your own?

Eskimo
Because I'm stronger; I look around
And see the fish consume the worm,
Seal eat the fish, and I the seal. (*TM,* 243)

The Eskimo's argument pushes Lucifer into philosophizing about the importance and influence of physical well-being, particularly having sufficient quantities of food, at turning points in human history. Adam cannot bear Lucifer's reasoning and asks the Eskimo if there are others like him around.

Eskimo
Oh many indeed, more than I could count
On all my fingers. But even though I beat
My neighbours' head in, it is pointless,
New settlers will keep coming, seals are few.
If god you are, I beg you, do this for me,
Let there be less of men and more of seals. (*TM,* 247)

This brutal statement is more than what Adam can bear. He wants to leave and does not wish to meet the Eskimo's wife but then he realizes that she is Eve. Adam wants to return from the future to the moment when he fell asleep.

The above brief overview and quotations show that the Eskimo scene is not only desolate but dystopic. Lotze (91, 96) argues that it is nihilistic. Like some other poets in early 19th-century Hungary (e.g. Mihály Vörösmarty, Péter Vajda), Madách was greatly influenced by theories about entropy, especially by Charles Fourier's *Théorie de l'unité universelle* which predicted the cooling down of the solar system (*SzKK,* 783). Károly Nendtvich, a pioneer of industrial chemistry in Hungary, published a book in 1851 discussing the future of the Earth from a geological point of view, claiming that phenomena of the polar circles would slowly move to the South, covering the hot deserts with eternal ice (this idea appears in some poems by Madách, too – *SzKK,* 781). Madách shared and integrated the concerns of his contemporaries about man's position in the universe, about free will, about theological questions. In Lotze's view, "Lucifer serves as Feuerbach's spokesman throughout the play" (90). Madách, however, was influenced not only by major philosophical and scientific works of his age, but also by important works of world literature, including the Bible, Plutarch (?), Milton, Goethe, as well as French, English, and German Romanticism. The parallels with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Goethe's *Faust* are obvious and frequently referred to – less widely known are the similarities with Victor Hugo's *La légende des siècles,* including visions of the future.[4]

As far as the Inuit scene is concerned, it might be based on an article published in March 1837 in one of the very first issues of *Atheneum,* a popular paper appearing twice a week, which most probably relied on articles on the same topic in Western European papers (*SzKK,* 790). "The Eskimos"[5] gave readers information about their life and habits, stating that they were created as humans but died as beasts (ibid.). Another source of information about life and inhabitants close to the North Pole was *Kraft und Stoff* by Ludwig Büchner[6]: The German philosopher wrote about Greenlanders in the chapter "Die Gottesidee" (*SzKK,* 791). A further German work that Madách may have used was *Demok-*

[4] For a more detailed elaboration on the literary influences see Lotze, *Imre Madách,* chap. 5 and 6.

[5] The word "Eskimo" was first printed in Hungarian in 1802 according to the etimological dictionary of the language – most probably it was a loan-word from German – and two years later one of the leading poets used it in a literary text.

[6] Lotze (*Imre Madách,* 91–2) summarizes it as follows: "Büchner's very successful book is a popular summary of the basic ideas of materialism. The author tried to demonstrate through many examples that our universe was not created or maintained by any divine power. The world of matter is infinite and is subject only to the inherent laws of nature. There is not force outside matter."

ritos (1832–1835) by Karl Julius Weber which described how Lapps and Greenlanders welcomed guests (*SzKK,* 794).

It is obvious that Madách had neither first-hand nor second-hand information about the Inuit. He was relying on various sources popular in his age. These works passed on some basic facts about life above the Arctic Circle, including a few anthropological features, but their main concern was creating possible scripts for changes in nature and the impacts of these changes a hundred years later. Experts of *The Tragedy of Man* usually elaborate on the intellectual and philosophical forerunners of this unusual mid-19th-century play. The question still remains of why the pessimistic/nihilist/dystopic penultimate scene is located on 'Eskimo-land' and not in Greenland or some other place on Earth.

I propose that the playwright was greatly influenced by a sensational story of his own age, namely the reports about the Franklin expeditions.[7] Hungarian newspapers and journals in the 1840s and 1850s also published articles about the unimaginable hardships that members of the Franklin expeditions and of the other expeditions searching for them had to endure. An article published in 1843 about 'Eskimos' is a short description of their conditions of life: The tallest willow and birch are but two feet high above the frozen ground, the people live on fishing and hunting, eating meat that is half rotten, half frozen, half dried; for dessert they have lichen, and they drink melted snow or the lard of fish. They wear the fur of wild animals. They have the look of animals. Their life is full of misery, but they seem to be satisfied with it[8] (*Hon és Külföld,* 1843–11–14). The stage instructions and dialogues of Scene XIV show several minute details that evoke the descriptions of the article published anonymously. Twelve years later another article came out – this one, however, referred to the Franklin expeditions. In the mid-1850s Madách was already working on *The Tragedy ...* and, apparently, a relatively detailed description of hardships the expedition had to face was welcome when composing the scene of utter desperation. In *Vasárnapi Újság* Virgil Szilágyi wrote about the place where Franklin was lost many years before.[9] He also mentions that several expeditions had been trying

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[7] Even our own age is very much interested in the topic of the Franklin expeditions – a series, *The Terror* is based on it.

[8] „A legmagasabb fűz és nyírfa két lábnyira emelkedik a fagyos földből [...] [ez a 'népfaj'] halászatból s vadászatból él, félig rothadt, félig fagyott, félig aszalt hust eszik, zuzmót rágcsál csemegéül, s hóvizet, halzsirt iszik reá. E vad bőrbe burkolt emberek tekintete inkább állati, s életök nyomorult tengés az igaz, de meg vannak elégedve." („Az eszkimó faj," *Hon és Külföld: Toldalék Múlt és Jelenhez,* November 14, 1843, 91, accessed August 19, 2022, https://adtplus.arcanum.hu/hu/view/HonEsKulfold_1843/?query=eszkim%C3%B3&pg=368&layout=.

[9] „Itt téved el a jéghegyek és zátonyok tengerszorosain sok év előtt Franklin az angol tengerész. Azóta többen indultak ennek is fölkeresésére, bár hasztalanul. Maguire kapitány 1852-ik év aug. havában indult

to find the survivors, including Captain Maguire who went in the HSS Plover to visit the Eskimos in August 1852. In the Eskimo village, he found igloos. The article gives a reliable description of igloo-making and continues with a description of Inuit staples: dried wild goose meat, raw fish, fish-lard, and seal-tail were offered to the visitors. Again, we can find exact references to the information the article provides in the scene by Madách. The reports about expeditions trying to find the Northwest Passage served as suitable starting points for Madách envisioning a miserable future and the Eskimos were but personifications of the danger mankind had to face. These considerations can explain the negative and frustrating image of the Eskimo world in Scene XIV of *The Tragedy of Man*.

This monumental play presented a challenge for visual artists, as well: How to represent the historical and visionary locations on stage in set and costume design? The solutions are wide-ranging, from historical "realism" to abstract representation or projected pictures on stage. Being a key work of Hungarian culture, several editions of *The Tragedy of Man* are illustrated with pictures. The first, and still best-known and most popular drawings, were made by Mihály Zichy (1827–1906), the "Hungarian Gustave Doré" (Théophile Gauthier's phrasing cited in *TM,* 267) in the mid-1880s, starting with fifteen pictures, and adding five more later. They were first exhibited in 1886 and published two years later. Zichy lived and worked in Paris between 1874 and 1879, so he had first-hand information about French art and literature. He was particularly attracted to visionary ideas on canvas. In the early 1880s he made illustrations for Goethe's *Faust* and Lermontov's *Demon*. With several years' break, he spent almost half a century in Saint Petersburg, working as a court painter. As Falus points out, Zichy "was always careful to represent a given period with historical precision and his illustrations testify to a profound knowledge of history, ethnography, and art" (in *TM,* 270). Examining his illustration of the Eskimo scene, however, we note that Zichy shows the Eskimo in "Nordic" fur coat and boots, but the characters are depicted standing in front of a teepee, a "Indian" tent, and not an igloo! Apparently, even in the mid-1880s European artists did not have access to authentic pictures of life in the North (while they could see paintings of Indians and their camps). So Zichy's illustration is only partly accurate – and this fact is all the more disturbing, since his pictures were used for stage representation in the late 19th-century.

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el Plover hajón, hogy meglátogassa az eszkimókat. [...] Mindjárt másnap el is ment Maguire, orvosával az eszkimófaluba. A kunyhók itt sajátságosan vannak építve. Jégtáblákat, hógöngyölegeket raknak egymásra, építés közben folyvást öntözvén olvasztott hóvízzel, hogy összefagyjanak. [...] Aszalt ludhussal, nyers hallal, halzsirral és félig rothadt fókafarkkal [...] kínálták meg a vendégeket." (Virgil Szilágyi, „Eszkimo király: Népismertető életkép," *Vasárnapi Újság,* May 27, 1855, 166, accessed January 8, 2021, https://adtplus.arcanum.hu/hu/view/VasarnapiUjsag_1855/?query=eszkim%C3%B3&pg=169&layout=s.

In the interwar period new approaches appeared in set designs for Madách's play, as Mária István's survey points out.[10] Concerning Scene XIV, she reveals that Benedek Baja's colourful design for a performance in 1926 featured a simple symmetrical stage evoking symbolism and expressionism, including a half circle suggesting a rising sun on one side and another half circle for the igloo on the other, the two connected with a rainbow. *Irodalmi Magazin* devoted a special issue to *The Tragedy of Man* in 2020 with several short articles and a well-chosen collection of pictures, including book illustrations. Of the latter, I wish to mention a drawing by Szeged-born János Kass (made in 1980, after the publication of the *Tragedy* illustrated by him) – whom, I am sure, György Szőnyi knew and liked. It shows a dark sun-disk in the background and a male figure sitting on a scaffold-like structure, evoking Rodin's *The Thinker*.

I am certain that György Szőnyi has seen several stagings of *The Tragedy of Man* so hopefully these remarks about one particular scene of the philosophical play by I. Madách will cast a different light on his memories of the performances.

[10] Mária István, „*Az ember tragédiája* látványvilága," accessed August 19, 2022, http://mek-oszk.uz.ua/01900/01925/html/menu_hu/scene hu/index.html; for Benedek Baja, see Székely György, főszerk., *Magyar Színművészeti Lexikon,* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1994), accessed August 19, 2022, https://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02139/html/sz02/29.html.