



## Idyll and Tension

### An Example of Hungarian Landscape Poetry

~ Gábor Vaderna ~

#### The Landscape of Shepherds

The study of aesthetics, which was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, integrated many Neoplatonic ideas. In his book on the literature of English Romanticism, Meyer Howard Abrams (1912–2015) deduces the birth of romantic art from the early modern influence of the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition. Although we (here in Central Europe) tend to avoid the term ‘romanticism’ (since we cannot even talk about Romanticism in its Anglophone meaning), this narrative can still be important to us. According to Abrams, Christianity was first ‘Neoplatonized’ when it connected the image of the personal, inner God to something of an impersonal absolute. At the same time, it defined the subject as alienated from his/her own origin by moving away from the center or unity, and finally, this Neoplatonic emanation was associated with some supernatural longing, as divine goodness and love flow continually toward secular beings who seek to return to their undivided state (ABRAMS 1973, pp. 150–152). Ultimately, Abrams derives the development of ‘modern paganism’ from humanist Neoplatonism,<sup>71</sup> and the anthropological notion that continuous self-education and confrontation with otherness is the essence of some kind of ontological ascension, i.e., *exaltatio* (IBIDEM, pp. 141–192). And from here, it is only a step away to perceive Neoplatonic aspects in the metaphysical beauty of aesthetic thinking. Abrams contrasts this tendency sharply with Kantian aesthetics – and thus in effect reconstitutes the contradiction of the Enlightenment and Roman-

71 A well-known version of this idea: GAY 1968.





ticism.<sup>72</sup> It is worth exploring this idea through a neo-Kantian narrative by Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) in his 1932 masterpiece *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (The Philosophy of the Enlightenment). For Cassirer, the dichotomy of metaphysical beauty and the lack of interest of aesthetic beauty arises within the Enlightenment, namely from the inner necessity of aesthetic thinking. As he argues, “classical aesthetics is oriented primarily to the work of art, which this aesthetics attempted to treat like a natural object and to study with analogous means” (CASSIRER 1968, p. 315). In contrast, he registers a subjectivist turn (which he ties primarily to Anthony Ashley-Cooper Shaftesbury, 1671–1713) after the purpose of art is to learn about the state of the subject and to describe it with art’s own means (IBIDEM). Of course, it is not necessary to go straight back to English philosophes to look for traces of this shift: for example, Abbot Jean-Baptiste Dubos (1670–1742) also talks about self-observation as a peculiar principle of aesthetic experience (DUBOS 1733, pp. 5–11), or we can also mention popular philosophy, which gained considerable popularity in the Habsburg Empire (cf. BÖHR 2003).

The separation of the classicist and post-classicist conceptions of art that still exists in Cassirer’s description has been circumvented in cultural history of recent years. A set of discourses was identified surrounding the concept of sensibility, where thinking of art is inseparable from the cultivation of other disciplines (such as medicine) and art was seen as an achievement of modern anthropology (cf. MULLAN 1988; ELLIS 1996). It focused variably on the rediscovery of antiquity in the modern era. In order to distinguish it from the first wave of Classicism, it was called Neoclassicism. The main issue of the latter approach stayed on within fine arts, and large-scale artistic conceptions could be developed from the problem of imitating the ancient (see JOHNSON 1969).

### **Imaging Landscape**

Describing landscape has its own poetic traditions. One of the most important of these is pastoral poetry. Shepherds live in an idyllic landscape

72 For this criticism cf. HILLIS MILLER 1972.



(Arcadia), in a world of love (eroticism) and arts (poetry and music). It is important to add, however, that by the end of the 18th century, the Bucolic world became a counterpoint to the modern world that was no longer recoverable. *Ideallandschaften* (ideal landscapes; CURTIUS 1973, pp. 191–209) are memories of a naive world that is the object of the modern subject's longing, a means of expressing their emotions, but was not available for the modern subject at the time – only assumed in the past of the golden age or the desired future. Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) gave the best-known explanation of this in his notable essay *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (On naïve and sentimental poetry, 1795). Sentimental poetry, especially idyll, talks about the following:

The poetical representation of an innocent and happy humanity is the universal concept of this kind of poetry. Because this innocence and this bliss seemed incompatible with the artificial relations of grand society and with a certain degree of education and refinement, so have the poets removed the scene of the idyl from the crowds of civic life to the simple pastoral state and given the same its place in the infancy of humanity before the beginning of culture. (SCHILLER 1795, online)

However, Schiller says, it would be too easy to go beyond the loss of the golden age if we were not able to recreate and experience it by the power of imagination. Yet this re-creation is also a major act because it can create aesthetic culture itself:

But such a state occurs not merely before the beginning of culture, rather it is also that which culture, if only it shall have everywhere a determined tendency, intends as its final end. The idea alone of this state and the belief in the possible reality of the same can reconcile man with all the evils, to which he is subjected on the path of culture, and were it merely a chimera, so would the complaints of those, be perfectly well founded, who decry grand society and the cultivation of the understanding as merely an evil and pass off the abandoned state of nature for the true end of man. (IBIDEM)



Culture, no matter how absurd the idea, is thus maintained by a belief in the reality of the idea, and in fact, the historical subject can regain the nature lost due to his culture by the means of culture. Imagined nature in this way will not be a reality – but it does exist. It gives meaning to the culture that eradicated it (see HALPER 1983, pp. 42–49). Schiller’s interpretation of nature and culture was so persuasive that from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, it became, even retrospectively, the standard point of pastorals and shepherd idylls. Frank Kermode, for example, introduced his anthology with these words:

Pastoral depends upon an opposition between the simple, or the natural, and the cultivated. Although this opposition can be complex, the bulk of pastoral poetry treats it quite simply, and assumes that natural men are purer and less vicious than cultivated men, and that there exists between them and Nature a special sympathy. (KERMODE 1952, p. 19)

Natural and cultured, naive, and sentimental presuppose each other, and this system of relations defines the problem of depicting the landscape. The idyllic landscapes of shepherds and nature in general both fall into a framework where the moment of leaving culture behind (according to the imperative “Go out into nature!”) can confront the horrifying tension between finite vs. infinite (sublime) and human aesthetics (beauty) incomprehensible to the mind. This is how the encounter with nature and the landscape will become a privileged moment of art – whether the result is a pleasant or an unpleasant experience.

Nature *eo ipso* has no aesthetic character. When we go out into nature, we like it, Schiller says, or at least “every fine man, who does not altogether lack feeling, experiences this, when he walks in the open, when he lives upon the land or tarries beside monuments of ancient times, in short, when he is surprised in artificial relations and situations with the sight of simple nature” (SCHILLER 1795, online). However, this type of interest, “in regard to nature is not aesthetical, but rather moral; for it is produced by means of an idea, not immediately through contemplation; also, it by no means



depends upon the beauty of forms” (IBIDEM). The transition from naïve to sentimental replaces moral interest with aesthetic interest. When the subject begins to admire the beauty of nature, he also loses from nature what made nature natural. The aestheticization of nature therefore leads to its own anthropomorphization. The subject now sees himself in and by nature and shapes nature into his self-image. The elements of the representation of nature, again quoting Schiller, “are what we were; they are what we ought to become once more” (IBIDEM). Thus, natural morality presupposes its own recovery – and this will be the stake of modern morality, and therefore the pursuit of aesthetics will be a moral act.

It is worth emphasizing once again that the anthropomorphism of the landscape is, of course, far from aesthetically uniform. Someone gets out into nature, but there are several variations of what happens to them afterwards. The observer can wander into nature, and in this case, nature is a pictorial framework, where inner (in today’s word: psychological) contents can be revealed. Nature can talk back, suggest something, or remain silent – the failure of the interaction between a human and nature can be as significant as the intimate encounter. Encountering nature can be a metaphysical meeting with ideas, but it can be an overwhelming experience, warning of the tragedy of the finiteness of human existence. What is common to all of them is but aesthetic mediation.

### **The Landscape of Hungary**

Dániel Berzsenyi (1776–1836) was a puzzling figure in Hungarian literature. He was a nobleman living in his estates, whose Lutheran pastor, János Kis (1770–1846), happened to be a Hungarian poet. Kis somehow found out that his friend and fellow wrote poems, and Kis helped Berzsenyi find a publisher to print them. The volume was published in 1813, and it was one of the first major bestsellers in Hungarian literature in the field of poetry. Berzsenyi then published another book in 1816; in addition to his earlier poems, there were some new ones in it. After that, he barely wrote anything poetic. He became the cult figure in Hungarian literature who no longer wrote poems. In 1830, the Hungarian Scientific Society (i.e., the National Academy) was established, and Berzsenyi became a member. He wrote some hard-to-understand aesthetic essays and one on the legal regulation of ag-

riculture. Berzsenyi was a puzzling figure. No one knows where he learned to write; where he gained his peculiar aesthetic views, or under what conditions he lived.

He did not publish his poem titled *Magyar Ország* (Hungary). The text is known from a collection of 1808 manuscripts:<sup>73</sup>

*Magyar Ország*

Itt hol szőke vizét a' Duna rengeti  
 Árpád' gazdag arany hantjain oh Hazám!  
 Céresnek koszorús homloka illatoz  
 'S a bővség ragyogó kürtje mosolyg réád.  
 Termékeny mezeid mennyei harmatok  
 Mossák 's tsűreidért Europa írígyed  
 Itt Edent mutato sorhegyek oldalán  
 Bachus tölt poharat, 's néked az isteni  
 Nectár legnemesebb vedreiből merít  
 Itt Arcádia zöld halmai nyillanak  
 Hol Pán leg jelesebb barmok után dalol  
 Barmok! millyeneket boldog Arabia  
 Nem látott sem egyéb nemzet az ég alatt  
 Kárpátidnak arany gyomra kevély Perut  
 Felmúlván örökös kintseit önti rád.  
 Minden jót valamit hint az Olimp Ura  
 Minden jót, valamit Tellus az emberi  
 Taplálásra terem néked az Istenek  
 Bőv mertekje pazarl büszke határidon.  
 Boldog Nepeidet Títusok őrizik,  
 Kik mind annyi Atyák és kegyes Istenek,  
 'S kiknek Tronusokon Trézia lelke leng.  
 Törvényed' s Koronád' Chérubim Őr fedi  
 Nem fertőzteti meg durva Tirán keze,

73 Manuscript Collection of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, M. Irod. Lev. 4r 44. sz. 99r-v. For the critical edition see BERZSENYI 1979.



Törvény nem hatalom kényne uralkodik  
Rajtad, s régi ditső nemzeti díszed áll.  
Óh bár vajha kies gyöngy koszorud között  
Még egy illatozo ró'ssa fakadna ki;  
Szállnának le reád Grecia Isteni  
Kik hajdan le hozák Attika földire  
A' nagy Mestereket, 's bölts tudományokat.<sup>74</sup>

It seems that Hungary is the Land of plenty in the poem. There are rich golden hills; the glittering horn of abundance sheds its values; the whole of Europe envies the sight of full barns. The ancient parallels of landscape idealization also express the culture of the *Ideallandschaft*: the poem almost depicts a landscape painting for us. We find Ceres's iconological characteristics (a wreath of wheat ears); and the full glass is associated with Bacchus. It is as if the two of them had just jumped off from a contemporary engraving or oil painting. E.g., standing in front of a Pan statue, the two of them are celebrating around them, a little boy holding a glass for Bacchus, Ceres watching the wheat wreath as a goat buck hits a boy in a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting by Sébastien Bourdon (1616–1671). Idyll and escape from it, beautiful

74 A prose translation: *Hungary* / Here, where the Danube trembles her blonde waters, on Árpád's rich golden hills, oh my Country! The wreath on Ceres's forehead is fragrant, and the glittering horn of abundance smiles at you. Your fertile fields are watered by heavenly dew, and Europe envies you for your barns. Here, on the sides of Eden-like mountains, Bacchus fills a glass and draws for you from the noblest pails of divine Nectar. Here, the green mounds of Arcadia begin, where Pan sings about the most illustrious cattle. Cattle! Happier than Arabia, or any other nation under the heavens has ever seen; the golden stomachs of your Carpathians, surpassing Peru, pour their countless treasures upon you. All the good that only the Lord of Olympus can sprinkle, all the good that only Tellus can create to nourish people, is poured out by the Gods in excess upon your proud lands. Your blessed peoples are guarded by Titus, they are many Fathers and merciful Gods, and above whose thrones the soul of Maria Theresa hovers. Your Law and Crown are protected by a Cherub Guard; uninfected by the rough Tyrannous' hand; you are ruled by law and not by the power of despotism; and your old famous national glory will be preserved. Oh, I wish another fragrant rose would emerge among your gorgeous pearl wreath; and the Gods of Greece, who brought the great craftsmen and wise sciences to the lands of Attica long ago, would descend upon you — then your proud head would reach the stars and the Zenith and Nadir would stare at you.





and ugly are co-present here.<sup>75</sup> Of course, Berzsenyi obviously did not know Bourdon, but he did know the iconological tradition. Nevertheless, the image he depicted in his poem avoids ugliness. Although Pan appears, he is the lord of Arcadia here, a herdsman whose cattle has surpassed the cattle of any other in the world. Although the ugly, the barbarian, the instinctive could turn up – it does not happen.

Arcadia – Arabia – Carpathians – Peru. The treasures of the fabulous far-East are opposed first to the Greek idyll and then to its earthly repetition, i.e., the Carpathian Basin. More and more gods appear: Ceres, Bacchus, and Pan are accompanied by the “Lord of Olympus”, i.e., Zeus-Jupiter, followed by Tellus, the mother of Earth. The gods pour out the good, Tellus is already wasting it: “Lord of Olympus can sprinkle all the good that only Tellus can create to nourish people, is poured out by the Gods in excess upon your proud lands.” The image is almost hyperbolic: all the good is poured out by the Gods in excess. When the overflowing abundance of nature has already traversed every geographical imagination, when it has reached possible divine perfection, then comes the praise of Hungary’s political system. This circular train of thought (natural abundance proves the success of a political system based on natural abundance) often emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a student, Berzsenyi could already read similar things about the natural endowments of Hungary in the textbook on the history of Hungary by Karl Gottlieb Windisch (1725–1793; BERZSENYI 1979, pp. 364–365). Berzsenyi piled up some well-known loci and images of the Hungarian landscape in his *Magyar Ország*. Iván Sándor Kovács (1937–2019) stated that the first verses of the poem “literally borrowed the whole incipit” of a Hungarian Baroque poem from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (KOVÁCS 2000). It is obviously a strong exaggeration. However, the knowledge of the patriotic tradition is certainly remarkable. Berzsenyi actually accumulates historical narratives and iconological places. All this is not

75 Bourdon, Sébastien: *Bacchus and Ceres with Nymphs and Satyrs (Sine Cerere et libero friget Venus)*, 1635–1637, oil on canvas, 51 x 77,5 cm, Szépművészeti Múzeum [Museum of Fine Arts], Budapest, Old Collection, ID No. 691. Retrieved June 7, 2021, from <https://www.mfab.hu/artworks/bacchus-and-ceres-with-nymphs-and-satyrs-sine-cerere-et-libero-friget-venus/>





simply a sensual description of the *Ideallandschaft*, but an elaboration towards the praise of the Hungarian political system.

The overflowing richness of the praise of nature (the outpouring of sublime images) continues in the second half of the poem. Titus guard the people – it is Berzsenyi’s favorite metaphor of power. He uses the word Titus in plural, referring simultaneously to specific historical figures and a ruling ideal. It is not possible to know which Roman emperors these Titus are, and Titus are the role models of the moderate ruler. Berzsenyi also placed this name in the plural because he could refer to several successive Roman emperors at the same time: Titus Flavius Vespasianus (69–79), Titus Flavius (79–81), Titus Flavius Domitianus (81–91). They link the golden age of Roman history to their reign – at least Berzsenyi could read this interpretation in *The Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius. The Hungarian analogue of this long, peaceful historical period is the reign of Maria Theresa. For Berzsenyi, her long reign was a similar example to that of the Titus’ in Rome. Such a pro-Habsburg appreciation of the Queen’s reign was quite common at the time. Later, after the reign of Joseph II (whom, by the way, Berzsenyi stubbornly omits), the era of Maria Theresa became a kind of historical golden age in memory, when the relationship between the Hungarian noble estates and the ruler was undisturbed and harmonious. When Berzsenyi wrote this poem (around 1808), Maria Theresa had been dead for almost thirty years. This idyll, this golden age – is it just in the past? Why not talk about the Habsburg emperors after Maria Theresa? Of course, the Hungarians did not like Joseph II, because of his aggressive politics of modernization, but Leopold II and Francis I could also have been mentioned. Where are they? Has the golden age passed? Hungary is Eden-like, the Law and Crown are protected by a Cherub Guard, i.e., by an angel guarding Heaven. The poem speaks in the present time and we have no reason to seriously doubt it: “you are ruled by law and not by the power of despotism”.

Yet the end of the poem accounts for a deficit: “Oh, I wish another fragrant rose would emerge among your gorgeous pearl wreath; and the Gods of Greece, who brought the great craftsmen and wise sciences to the lands of Attica long ago, would descend upon you — then your proud head would reach the stars and the Zenith and Nadir would stare at you.” Here it turns



out that in fact only some of Hungary's conditions are good. These are geographical and political features. "The great craftsmen and wise sciences" are the world of the arts and thinkers. For Neoplatonic *exaltatio* to take place ("your proud head would reach the stars"), it would certainly require things that are completely missing. What are these? The text changes from indicative to conditional at the end. What is missing here is "another fragrant rose", that is culture, art, or science.

It is possible to interpret the poem as criticizing the teleological historical narrative of the Hungarian estates: While nature provides an opportunity for ascension, the historical golden age (the reign of Maria Theresa) is over, and natural abundance has not brought culture with it (CSETRI 1986, pp. 181–182). In addition, we may add another uncertain phenomenon. There is a contradiction between the iconological tradition alluded to and the Eden depicted in the verse. Our countryside is wonderful, our cattle grow beautifully, the barns are full of grain – but something is missing here. It is not death that sneaks into this picture, but the lack of science and art makes the landscape "meaningless". The *Ideallandschaft* can only be revealed through the mediation of culture, and in this way, we read and interpret the cultural product that goes beyond its very existence. A cow, ears of grain, the law – these are meaningless in themselves. Only culture is able to elevate them to a higher level and add meaning.

A landscape itself, however idyllic it may be, does not make sense in itself. The political dimensions of this are clear – a free country, free people and a wise governance can only develop further through culture. And there is another aspect that is painfully missing from the picture that Berzsenyi painted of the country – the individual self and his/her individual emotions. Love was part of the Arcadian landscape, but Venus does not appear here. "Sine Cerere et Baccho friget Venus" – Venus feels cold without Ceres and Bacchus. This proverb, which comes from the play *Eunuchus* by Terence (195/185–159? B.C.), also has a great iconological tradition.

The substantive elements of the world of Arcadian shepherds are love, music, and poetry. They are not there in the Arcadian landscape of Berzsenyi. In the literal reading of the poem, the praise of the Hungarian landscape is





most evident but if the Arcadian iconological tradition is also at stake, then the shortcomings become apparent.

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Dániel Berzsenyi apprehended the landscape as an aesthetic problem. As a figure of real *Aufklärer*, he believed that nature could only be understood through culture, and that only an ideal landscape alone could provide the opportunity for this process of understanding to take place. As can be seen above, Berzsenyi had doubts that this could happen in Hungary.

It is not too common to know a direct political application of speculative aesthetic thinking. If so, the proposal to reform the political system or administration of an ideal state is usually known. Berzsenyi proposed to regulate the administrative order of the village in one of his manuscript drafts.<sup>76</sup> There he talks about founding elementary schools, about the importance of teaching dance at school, etc. These fit in well with the aesthetic program that the poem *Magyar Ország* suggests. At the same time, in his village rules, he would punish thieves with dramatic cruelty – it would only offer shame to youthful criminals (cutting hair, set of stocks, spanking), but it would lock the elders up in a prison camp even for a futile crime. This radical rigidity is surprising. It makes it clear that the problems of the social reality of the village (theft, alcoholism, uneducated peasants) could not be dealt with by the abstract expectations of aesthetic thinking.

My conclusion is not only that aesthetics and reality are different, but that culture and violence are not necessarily a dichotomy. Berzsenyi was probably a consistent thinker – he thought that whoever did not want to be a cultured citizen should be forced to become one. In this sense, there is a serious cost of achieving Arcadia.

76 Balatoni Múzeum [Balaton Museum], Keszthely, Manuscript Collection, B. leg. 44.8. On the interpretation of the manuscript see VADERNA 2018.



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