

On the two narrative models of Hungarian Romanticism

Róbert Milbacher* 

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: March 5, 2025 • Accepted: June 12, 2025

Published online: August 22, 2025

© 2025 The Author(s)



ABSTRACT

This study explores two distinct narrative models within Hungarian Romanticism, emphasizing the influences of German early Romanticism and Enlightenment thought. The *Determinational Model*, rooted in Count József Teleki's 1818 essay, frames Romanticism as a historicized, anthropological shift driven by the introduction of Christian thought. Teleki, drawing from Schiller and German Romantics like Schlegel and Jean Paul, contrasts Greek naivety with Christian solemnity, presenting the human condition as marked by an existential lack and longing. This deterministic paradigm highlights the tension between finite earthly existence and the infinite spiritual realm, shaping both individual and communal aspirations for perfection. This model manifests in early 19th-century Hungarian literature, notably in the works of Kölcsey and Vörösmarty, through themes of insatiable desire and metaphysical suffering.

The *Autonomy Model*, inspired by Meyer H. Abrams' interpretation of Romanticism, suggests that post-Kantian secularization redefined the Judeo-Christian legacy, separating its spiritual structure from its theological content. This model emphasizes the self's quest for autonomy, reflecting the duality of human nature and the struggle for transcendence without religious frameworks. Vörösmarty's neo-mythological poetics exemplify this approach, integrating national and secular aspirations into the Romantic search for meaning. The study posits that Hungarian Romanticism navigated between these two paradigms, negotiating the tension between historical determinism and the desire for self-determination within a desacralized universe.

KEYWORDS

Hungarian romanticism, Romantic view of humanity Teleki, Schiller, Milton, Paradise Lost

* Corresponding author. E-mail: milbacher.robort@pte.hu

PART I. THE DETERMINATIONAL MODEL

In his programmatic essay of 1818, Count József Teleki, essentially echoing Schiller's "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," begins with the following diagnostic assertion: "Post-Schillerian, flawed romantic poetry possesses a completely distinct form. Its predominant trait is profound solemnity, often with a dark, cheerless component." (Teleki, 1818) Of course, it is not claimed that Teleki's study initiated the Romantic approach in Hungarian literature. Contemporary scholars could have been exposed to ideas of the primarily German Romantics of the time through various channels. Therefore, Teleki's study is not regarded as representative in a philological sense. However, the study is significant in that it introduced the concept of Romanticism (referred to as "romántos" in Teleki's work), which is a distinct and characteristically separate paradigmatic theoretical term. Hence, it is a self-reflexive and simultaneously self-descriptive concept.

As known, after studying in Göttingen, Teleki followed Schiller's philosophical approach upon returning from his European excursion. However, he diverged from it in certain circumstances, incorporating German contemporary romantic aesthetics from August Wilhelm Schlegel, Jean Paul, Bouterweck, and others. These additions allowed him to develop a relatively independent theory.

Teleki's departure from Schiller's study is in its structural approach as it applies a "historicized" generalizing method, which uses the metaphor of the age of life taken possibly from Herder and fundamental to the era's style. This stage, referred to as "childhood", is characterized by cheerful simplicity for both humanity as a whole and the individual, differing from the "more sombre youth and human age".

Schiller, following Kant's concept of naivety, understands it as a way of thinking or a form of relationship to the world that can be followed in any age. He sees only one of its clearest realizations in his neoclassical vision of Greekness. In contrast, Teleki draws a sharp mental-historical line between Greek naivety and Christian Romanticism. He states that 'Christian Romanticism,' which has spread to all the newer nations, is very different from both and deserves our special attention. The significant shift in human thinking can be attributed to the introduction of the Christian religion. It is important to note that this statement is subjective and should be marked as such.

Teleki argues that the Greek religion pursued only temporary external happiness, while immortality, which it believed in, was merely a distant shadow, a dream weakened by the present real world. In contrast, Christian religion has changed this perspective. By daring to contemplate the infinite, the finite has been abolished and annihilated. Life on Earth has been transformed into a shadow world, a faint morning twilight. The ever-brightening day of real existence will only dawn in the future. The suspicion, which has been dormant in the heart, that we are seeking unattainable happiness here, that no external object can wholly occupy our hearts, and that all earthly beauties are false imaginings and ephemeral phantasms... Thus, our souls long with a sighing desire for passage to this probationary life as an outcast, to their real home. The deep earnestness of their song is the chief note.

Humanity, having left the childhood state metaphorized by Greekness, necessarily found itself confronted with new tasks. It follows a deterministic path over time and, by reflecting on itself, can never return to the childhood state. The advancement of humanity throughout history has consistently led to the development of scientific thinking as a result of reflection.

The conceptual matrix of Romanticism is well-known for its finite–infinite opposition, the dichotomy of shadow–world–reality, the unattainability of happiness, desire, and longing. This lexicon, originating from German early Romanticism, offers a programmatic diagnosis for the new generation of Hungarian literature that seeks to distance itself from Kazinczy's neoclassicism and emancipate itself from it.

Compared to the ancient Greeks, Teleki summarizes his thoughts as follows: the finite exists only on earth and in bodies, while the spiritual is infinite and boundless. This gave rise to an insatiable desire, an insatiable love, an unspeakable salvation, and suffering without time or limit in Christian poetry.

Teleki's historicist approach, in contrast to Schiller's, does not allow a return to a state of naivety. This is because the maturity of Christianity creates a new anthropological, ideological and artistic paradigm, forming a necessary and unbreakable boundary between the old and the new. The old poetry, which is characterized by the category of naivety, is often viewed as a form of nostalgia. In Schiller's case, it is seen as a sense of purpose. Schiller argues that the Greeks felt naturally, while we only feel the natural.

Teleki's new poetry places man in the perspective of a universe that opens up to infinity through alienation from nature and reflection upon it. This leads to a never-ending search and a yearning unhappiness in a desecralized earthly existence. However, this existence draws its culture-constructing motivation from desire precisely because of the perception of absence. The motivation for this endeavour stems from the desire to overcome personal unhappiness, which is based on the experience of the oppressive infinity of the world and the imperfection of the universe. Additionally, this personal ambition gives rise to a community or national programme of improvement and perfection. This programme became part of a patriotic discourse of contribution to humanity, represented in the concept of the 'big world', which was characteristic of the reform era.

It is evident that in a world without sacredness, and where man is no longer under the illusion of completeness, there is a desire to redefine the gendered quality of man, both personally and communally. This is driven not only by rationality but also by the metaphysical urge of the Enlightenment's program of perfectibility. Vörösmarty's oeuvre provides a clear example of the thematization of Romanticism, particularly from the epic of the 1920s to the great mythical synthesis of Csongor and Tünde. The themes range from personal to communal (national) levels, offering a framework for the emerging new Hungarian literature that aimed to put both individual and communal narratives into a metaphysical perspective.

The Schiller–Teleki paradigm of Romanticism redefined man on an existential level by assuming the rupture of his former harmonious totality of being. It absolutized the experience of his finitude and infinitude, stating that 'finitude is only on earth and in bodies', while 'souls are infinite and boundless'. The existential diagnosis results in a state of being that can be described as a lack, both ontologically and epistemologically. This lack is manifested as an insatiable desire on a psychological-anthropological level, which is embodied in the action programme of searching and wandering. This model still characterizes the state of being of European man. The experience of ceasing to exist can cause unhappiness, prompting a search for diverse forms of happiness at both the individual and community levels.

The experience of losing one's sense of self can lead to a search for happiness, both individually and within the community. In the 1810s, the new romantic literary paradigm explored the experience of lack, which resulted in a new form of unhappiness known as 'suffering without

time and without limits'. This was evident in the works of young Kölcsey, such as 'Ideál' (1813) and 'Ábránd' (1813), which were considered sentimental. It is worth noting that this exploration was independent of Teleki and directly connected to the German tradition of early Romanticism, which is most fully explored in 'Endymion' (1823–24). The poem creates a terrifying mythology surrounding the meeting and union of the earthly shepherd boy and the transcendent goddess Luna. This theme is a fundamental problem in many forms of Hungarian poetry and is also present in the works of the young Vörösmarty.

PART II. THE AUTONOMY MODEL

According to Meyer H. Abrams' interpretation of Romanticism, the Enlightenment's secularizing tendency removed the Judeo-Christian tradition from its church-theological context. Simultaneously, it recontextualized it in the light of post-Kantian philosophy, forming the basis of the Romantic view of humanity and the world. According to Abrams, secular thinkers did not approach Judeo-Christian culture in the same manner as Christian thinkers did with the ancient pagan tradition. Instead of ignoring or rejecting it, they integrated it as a part of their worldview based on secular premises. "Secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of the centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of their inheritance of classical and pagan thought. The process—outside the exact sciences at any rate—has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises." (Abrams, 1973)

A paradoxical situation has arisen where the Judeo-Christian tradition of European culture's access to the transcendent has been used to redefine the Romantic self without its theological, dogmatic, and ritual implications. The Judeo-Christian tradition's structural legacy, including its linear and apocalyptic view of time and history, is responsible for the nostalgic sense of loss and the utopian vision of happiness projected into the future. This tradition also presents the subject in a duality of heaven and earth, physical and spiritual, and includes autobiographical ideas of the self condemning itself to freedom and rebellious self. These elements are fundamental to the historical consciousness and anthropology of Romanticism.

András Martinkó's influential study of Vörösmarty may have had similar theoretical foundations to Abrams' book. However, Martinkó most likely was not familiar with Abrams' theses as early as 1969, as he does not refer to them. Martinkó summarized Vörösmarty's Romanticism in a search for a kind of secular heavenly forms (Martinkó, 1975). Vörösmarty's neo-mythological experiment aimed to humanize and nationalize Christian transcendence. The literary representation sought to depict a human and world view that lacked the sacral but remained oriented towards transcendence. The main argument of this work, which Abrams discovered in part in German but most fully in the English Romantic tradition, is the redefinition of humanity in the post-Kantian theoretical framework in relation to transcendence. Dante and Milton, in particular, provided the basic representational pattern for the English Romantics, as well as the impetus for the secularization and humanization of the biblical tradition. Shelley referred to this as the systematic construction of modern mythology. "Behind Wordsworth's program for poetry was *Paradise Lost*, and behind *Paradise Lost* were the Holy Scriptures." (Abrams, 1973: 32)

For English Romantics, Milton served as both a starting point and an endless source of influence and concern, allowing for the development of a secularized Romantic vocabulary based on the biblical tradition (Newlyn, 1993; Shears, 2009). In Hungarian Romanticism, it is difficult to discern this Miltonic influence, as the moral-theological context of Milton's early Protestant reception in Hungary does not anticipate the secularization process necessary for Romantic reappropriation. However, it can be argued that the interpretation of human unhappiness as a consequence of satanic pride, the fall into sin and exile as a desire for autonomy, and the use of rhetorical and figurative elements to represent these ideas, is a product of a Romantic reading of Milton in the Hungarian tradition from the mid-1820s onwards. This is most evident in the works of Vörösmarty and particularly in Madách's Tragedy.

Vörösmarty's anthropology views man as a dual entity, possessing both rational and irrational, corporeal and spiritual, material and mental, celestial and terrestrial aspects. This requires a narrative model that can integrate this duality. Man is neither angel nor animal, but rather strives towards heaven while acting on earth with the consciousness of his divinity. He seeks a specific mode of autonomy, measured in the light of the transcendent. A figurative and dramatic model of this can be found in the mythology of 'Paradise Lost'. It is likely that in the mid-1820s, the author obtained a prose translation from the French by Sándor Bessenyei, who had translated it from the original. Later, the author also found the original English text in their library.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M.H. (1973). *Natural supernaturalism, tradition and revolution in romantic Literature*. W W Norton & Company, New York – London.
- Martinkó, A. (1975). *A földi menny eszméje Vörösmarty költészetében*. In: Horváth, K., Lukácsy, S., and Szörényi, L. (Eds.), „Ragyognak tettei...” *Tanulmányok Vörösmartyról*. Székesfehérvár, Fejér Megyei Tanács Művelődésügyi Osztálya, pp. 67–102.
- Newlyn, L. (1993). *Paradise lost and the romantic Reader*. Oxford University Press.
- Shears, J. (2009). *The romantic legacy of Paradise Lost*. Agathe Publishing Company, pp. 12–20.
- Teleki, J. (1818). *A' régi és új költés külömbsegeiről*. Tudományos Gyűjtemény, 2, pp. 48–73.