

**The Price of Emancipation: Peasant-Noble Relations as  
Depicted by Novelists József Eötvös and  
Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach**

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The year 1848 marks a critical caesura in the rural class relations of the Habsburg empire. The emancipation of the serfs had far-reaching consequences not only for the daily lives of nobles and peasants, but also for the economy, social structure, political process, and cultural life of the monarchy. Prior to 1848, the serfs in Austria and Hungary were suppressed and exploited by the feudal order. After 1848, they were abandoned by it and left to fend for themselves with neither the economic nor the political means to do so.<sup>1</sup> The emancipation engendered developments in agrarian society that were unique to the nations under Habsburg hegemony. By this time, serfdom had ceased to exist in the western half of Europe.<sup>2</sup> It continued, however, in parts of the Balkans and in Russia.<sup>3</sup> The conjuncture of the social developments leading up to and following in the wake of the 1848-49 Revolution with the increasing role of objective portrayal and social engagement in literature resulted in a distinctive brand of literary realism in East Central Europe.

While there was certainly increasing attention paid to bourgeois and industrial society even in overwhelmingly agricultural Hungary,<sup>4</sup> rural themes continued to dominate East Central European literature up to World War I and beyond. The stranglehold of the landed oligarchy and feudal institutions on the economy and government of the Habsburg Monarchy simply did not permit industrialization and urbanization on the scale at which it proceeded in Germany, France, and England in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The demographic realities of East Central Europe, where more than half of the population still consisted of peasants as late as 1900,<sup>6</sup> are reflected in the literary works produced there. Rural class reform was a major theme in Austrian and Hungarian literature up to 1848. After the failure of the Revolution, passionate hope of reform was gradually replaced by resignation and eventually fatalism as it grew ever more clear that the situation among the lower classes in Austria-Hungary had if anything worsened since the emancipation of the serfs. The tran-

sition from Karl Beck (1817-1879) to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), from Sándor Petőfi (1823-1849) to Zsigmond Móricz (1879-1942), is enormous and models the progression from patriotic, nationalistic Romanticism through the melancholy detachment of Realism to the hopelessness of Naturalism in its peculiar, East Central European form. This progression from impassioned hope to fatalistic pessimism can be traced, in durkheimian terms, to the persistent and intensifying anomie that burdened agrarian society in the nations united under the Habsburg monarchy.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate a segment of the path from Romanticism to Naturalism in East Central Europe through the example of two authors who focused their attention on the misery and injustices of rural society: József Eötvös (1813-1871) who stands at the threshold of Hungarian Realism, and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830-1916) who represents the late stages of Poetic Realism in German literature.

With *A falu jegyzője* (1845), Eötvös emerged as pre-revolutionary Hungary's foremost exponent of social criticism in the novel.<sup>7</sup> The crying need for social reform was recognized across the Habsburg empire and became a dominant theme in Austrian, Hungarian, and Czech literature. Bohemia's Karel Havlíček Borovský (1821-1856) advocated reform in his journalistic writings and in brilliant political satires.<sup>8</sup> With *Spaziergänge eines Wiener Poeten* (Promenades of a Viennese Poet, 1831), Slovenian native Anastasius Grün (1806-1876) produced one of the most important works of his career as a lyric poet and political satirist.<sup>9</sup> While Eötvös belongs to the same reform-minded tradition with these and numerous other East Central European writers, he drew his poetic inspiration from the Romanticism of France's Victor Hugo, whom he met personally in 1838.<sup>10</sup> What appealed most to Eötvös about Hugo's theories was his notion of the social mission of dramatic literature.<sup>11</sup> Sőter cites the following passage from Eötvös's essay "Hugo Victor mint drámai költő":

All *poesis* has its origin in the people, and only as long as it maintains its tie with them, as long as it makes an impression on them and, through teaching or delighting, has an effect on their inner life, only then does it answer its great vocation, only then does it merit that majestic position which it occupies.<sup>12</sup>

Eötvös was committed to the belief that literature must implement a sort of liberal democratic version of Horace's "utile dulci," must entertain readers while at the same time instructing them in important contemporary moral issues, with the goal of rousing them to action in the

name of social reform. This is the principle that underpinned the creation of *A falu jegyzője*.

Yet Eötvös's vision of "*a nép*" [the people], is tainted with Romantic idealism and reveals the peculiar nature of the relationship of the humanitarian-minded noble to the social groups whom he wanted to involve in the reform process. Baron József Eötvös, who grew up in a conservative aristocratic household speaking German and Latin,<sup>13</sup> was in a poor position to bring his message to the masses of underprivileged Hungarians who needed most urgently to benefit from it. In the first place, a majority of Hungarians were illiterate during Eötvös's lifetime.<sup>14</sup> Thus reaching them by means of a sprawling three-volume novel was impractical at best. Nonetheless, *A falu jegyzője* achieved great popularity, not among the lower classes who might have identified with the serf protagonist Viola, but with literate bourgeois and aristocratic readers both in and outside of Hungary.<sup>15</sup> Eötvös's novel could never have had the impact on the local readership that it did had it not been composed in Hungarian. It was at the expense of great effort that Eötvös, inspired as a teenager by the example of his tutor József Pruzsinsky, undertook to learn the language of his homeland.<sup>16</sup> In an era when even great reformers like István Széchenyi could barely communicate in the Magyar language, this was a bold move and illustrates well Eötvös's commitment to Hungarian society and culture. By composing his great social-critical tapestry in a language they could understand, Eötvös hoped to reach the educated Magyar bourgeois and noble audience that was in the best position to initiate the social reforms he believed necessary to bring about stability and justice in Hungary. All ideals concerning the democratic nature of literature aside, Eötvös saw reform essentially as something to be enacted from above, by the aristocrats who ran the government and were both legally and morally responsible for the peasant classes under their tutelage. This understanding of the reform process was natural in a feudal society where serfdom was still an important reality. Loránt Czigány stresses the unusual pre-revolutionary Hungarian situation:

[. . .] in Hungary, where an urban middle class was still sadly lacking in the first half of the nineteenth century, the road to reform . . . was paradoxically paved by the privileged classes, or rather by an exclusive minority of aristocrats whose enthusiastic liberalism appeared to run counter to their natural self-interest in perpetuating their own privileges and who, unselfishly enough, were willing and able to understand broader considerations than their own class interest when thinking in terms of national economy.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, there was an important minority of Hungarian nobles who desired to live up to the notion that "noblesse oblige." This attitude died a slow and painful death after 1848-49, when feudal obligations were severed with the emancipation of the serfs.

In *A falu jegyzője*, however, it was very much alive. With this novel, József Eötvös created a fictional model of the peasant-aristocrat cooperation he was convinced must be realised in Hungary to bring about constructive social change. The figure constellation is set up in a kind of triangular system, with first the peasants and oppressed minorities, the victims of injustice who demonstrate by all they suffer the urgent need for reform. These include one of two protagonists: the persecuted serf Viola, his wife and children, as well as Peti the Gypsy, "Üveges Jancsi" (the Jewish glazier), the *gulyás* István, Ákos Réty's servant János (the old hussar), Liptákné (Mrs. Lipták), and other minor characters such as the members of Viola's band and the degenerate inmates who share Tenge-lyi's cell with him when he is imprisoned.

Then there are those members of the gentry and bureaucracy who champion reform and, in one way or another, come to the aid of the oppressed peasantry: the protagonist Jónás Tengelyi and his family, his best friend Pastor Boldizsár Vándory (Samuel Réty's brother), then principally the younger generation of the gentry, represented by Kálmán Kislaky, Ákos Réty, and his sister Etelka; another important reformer is the hunchbacked attorney, young Völgyesy. To this list can be added Kálmán's father, Bálint Kislaky who, midway through the novel, struggles against his own passivity and summons the strength to provide instrumental assistance in Viola's escape after the ludicrous *statárium* (the summary court notorious for quick execution of persons charged with capital crimes) that sentenced him to hang. A humorous adjunct of this group is Jakab Bántornyí, otherwise known as "James," whose inordinate admiration for English society provides not only comic relief but also a serious foil to the defect-ridden Hungarian society that Eötvös wanted so badly to see changed.

The third group is headed by two noblemen, Chief Justice Pál Nyúzó (*nyúzó* means "flayer") and his sidekick Macskaházy (*macska*: "cat"), the Réty family lawyer, both of whom serve the ends of the cruel and egotistical Rétyné (Lady Réty), who also maintains full control over the views and conduct of her husband, Deputy Lieutenant Samuel Réty, until her suicide at the end of the novel. Another important member of this group is Viola's rival, the nobleman-turned-robber Czifra. Several minor characters also serve as enemies of reform, including the snuff-pinchng judge Zátonyi, and Baron Sóskuty.

There is a certain amount of transition between these two groups. Bálint Kislaky is a good example of this. He allowed himself to be

appointed president of the *statárium* out of little more than a naive sense of duty; but the moment he finds himself responsible for overseeing Viola's hanging, he begins to question his complicity with the unjust laws designed by Hungary's nobility:

[N]ow that I think the situation over calmly, it appears to me also that the protocol was not drafted properly. Whom are they going to blame for that other than me, the president? But let that be as it may — they may say that I am a fool, they can say anything, I don't care, but if I go out of my house and see that unfortunate man, whom they have hanged on my property, and whose life I could have saved, . . . then my life's peace is lost.<sup>18</sup>

Kislaky's decision to break the very laws his position demands that he uphold in order to save Viola from execution is an important turning point. He later resigns the presidency altogether.

Another transitional character who experiences a conversion of sorts is Jancsi the Jew, whose utter destitution conspires to make him an accomplice of the treacherous Lady Réty:

[. . .] for he was a Jew: that was the story of his life. Born to share the misery of his family, . . . abandoning his parental home in order to experience not freedom but the totality of his desolation, struggling for his daily bread not through honest work, for that of course was forbidden the Jew, but through cunning and deceit . . .<sup>19</sup>

Jancsi's deathbed conversion to honesty and truthfulness is provoked by Pastor Vándory, seemingly the only person who cares about him as his life nears its miserable end, and his confession results in the destruction of the evil Lady Réty. Both Kislaky's and Jancsi's conversions tilt the balance in the novel in favour of reform.

Both the crying need for and the will to produce reform constitute the primary source of tension in *A falu jegyzője*. The situation is crystallised around the principal character Viola, who is reduced by a single act of injustice perpetrated by the evil trio: Lady Réty, Nyúzó, and Macskaházy, from the status of a wealthy peasant to that of an outlaw. This drastic formulation of the day-to-day oppression weighing down on the lives of millions of Hungarian serfs was calculated to shock readers into an awareness of the urgency of reform. What happens to Viola, the author implies, happens on a daily basis to peasants throughout Hungary. The result can be understood in terms of Durkheim's concept of anomie,

where the peasants are squashed by the nobility to a level of misery far below the standards they deserve for the contributions they have made to the welfare of society through their labours.<sup>20</sup> Viola had acquired his wealth through honest hard work. He was robbed of it by the lazy, unscrupulous nobles. The situation mirrors in harsh terms the repressive exploitation exercised against the Hungarian *jobbágy* by the nobility, and the widespread anomie that reigned in peasant society as a consequence.<sup>21</sup> The reaction Eötvös called for to this desperate situation was not the pathological response outlined by Durkheim in his study of suicide, but a productive, collective effort to reverse the damage caused by ruthless oppression through the violation of antiquated laws and the creation of a new justice.<sup>22</sup>

The effort to spare Viola from the worst of Hungary's medieval justice system is launched from several angles. Early in the novel, Ákos Réty is instrumental in extricating Peti, one of Viola's most important informants, from Justice Nyúzó's clutches. Tengelyi's daughter Vilma, inspired by the humanitarian example of her father, offers their home to shelter Viola's wife and children. Then, when Viola comes by for an ill-timed visit, Vilma, taking her cue from Mrs. Lipták, aids him in his escape from the law by permitting him to hide in the house while Nyúzó is hot on his trail. In return for these favours, Viola pledges to protect Tengelyi's papers (several of which document his nobility), as he knows of lady Réty's conspiracy to steal them. On the night of the robbery, he risks his life to rescue the Notary's papers from Lady Réty's henchmen, Czifra and the Jew (*üveges Jancsi*).

This pattern of mutual cooperation and aid in the face of danger characterises the interpersonal relationships between much of the nobility and peasantry throughout *A falu jegyzője*. The abuse perpetrated by aristocrats on the serfs is represented by the conspiracy of Nyúzó, Macskaházy, and Lady Réty against Viola. The other side of that relationship, the protection and nurturing of the serfs by their lords, can be seen in Ákos and Kálmán's concern for Viola's safety, and the assistance lent Zsuzsi and Viola by the Tengelyi family. The reward for that protection follows when Viola expresses his gratitude by extending help to Tengelyi: "I owe the notary and his family a debt of gratitude," Viola tells Mrs. Lipták, "they took in my poor wife, may God reward them for it, and they've kept me alive — for that I will show my thanks."<sup>23</sup>

Eötvös intensifies this network of relationships with the capture of Viola by Nyúzó and Macskaházy and his rescue from execution, effected by a series of nobles and peasants working in complex cooperation with each other to prevent Viola's death at the hands of one of prerevolutionary Hungary's most barbaric judicial institutions. After Völgyesi's valiant yet unsuccessful attempt to prevent the court from passing a

sentence of hanging, it is Kálmán Kislaky who, moved to action by a letter from Etelka Réty asserting Viola's innocence in the Tengelyi robbery, enlists the old hussar János's help to initiate a plan for Viola's escape. Vándory manages to get the prisoner moved to the chaff-loft, from whence he can escape more easily. Kálmán uses the rich stock of wine donated by his parents to get the judges and guards drunk. Peti the Gypsy makes arrangements for Viola's getaway, using a horse and falsified passport donated by the *gulyás* István. It is difficult to imagine a more ingenious cooperative effort between peasants and nobles. Viola escapes the "justice" system's clutches with ease, and succeeds in beginning a new life for himself and his family outside of Taksony county.

What Eötvös creates in this novel is a fanciful microcosmic depiction of peasant-lord relations in the pre-1848 Habsburg empire. Before the serfs were emancipated, relations between them and their lords were of necessity close, and while at their worst they could be barbaric (persecution of Viola by Nyúzó and cohorts), at their best they were familial (assistance lent Viola by the Kislaky family and friends). The relationship was blatantly hierarchic, as it is in *A falu jegyzője*: the social superiority of the gentry over the peasantry was unquestioned. Yet the rapport between the upper and lower classes was based on a foundation of community and mutual aid and protection.<sup>24</sup> It was within this somewhat idealised framework of patriarchal relations that József Eötvös and many like him envisioned a reform movement in Hungary. Political reform builds the backdrop behind Viola's misadventures throughout the novel. The loudest voice for social change is wielded by Jónás Tengelyi, an influential member of the liberal Bántornyai party, who is a source of great anxiety to Count Marosvölgyi, Taksony's Lord Lieutenant. When the Lord Lieutenant asks the Notary what the county magistrate can do to make productive citizens out of the destitute serfs, Tengelyi answers:

A great deal, yes, a great deal, Your Excellency! . . . The nobility, through the county system, has built ramparts around itself, behind which it has been able to defend its privileges even against the laws. But if we do not want to change this arrangement, why do we not bring the people behind these ramparts as well? This mechanism, which has been strong enough to maintain our freedom for us, could it be so weak that, if we wanted, it could not protect the people from oppression?<sup>25</sup>

The Count reacts to Tengelyi's plea with disdain. The Notary's determined advocacy for desperately needed improvements among the peasant classes wins him the enmity not only of Marosvölgyi, but of all the

conservatives in Taksony, including his former good friend, Sámuel Réty. Thanks to Nyúzó and Macskaházy's machinations, Tengelyi is denied the privileges of his noble status, and his call for reform is silenced. Eötvös renders Tengelyi's defeat all the more bitter by allowing him to be sent to prison as the accused in the murder of Macskaházy, which Viola had committed.

In the final chapters of the novel, Viola, the serf and principal victim of oppression, sacrifices his life to rescue Tengelyi, a nobleman and Taksony's most ardent reformer. Here the personal and the political come together, in the self-sacrifice of the peasant for the one lord who has done the most for him, in the rescue of the reform movement by the most urgent example of why it is so badly needed. Eötvös communicates real hope for social progress. His proposal involves a cooperative effort between peasants and nobles, where the nobles would lead the charge by putting their political power and economic resources to work in a programme supported by the active involvement of the oppressed peasants in the process of social and legal reform. A similar vision characterises works by other pre-revolutionary Austrian and Hungarian authors. In his poem "An den Kaiser" (To the Emperor, 1831), Anastasius Grün reminds the Austrian emperor of the sacrifice of labour and life made by "*das Volk*," "the people," on behalf of the empire, and asks him in the name of mutual love and respect to reward the people with legal and social reforms. Sándor Petőfi's poem "A nép nevében" (In the People's Name, 1847) likewise underscores the indispensable role of the sweat of the people in cultivating Hungarian soil and safeguarding Hungarian freedom, but also contains the warning that withholding their human rights from them may result in revolution. Alfred Meißner (1822-1885) demands in his poem "Neue Sklaven" (New Slaves, 1845) that the foundation of love upon which the now perverted feudal system was first erected be supplanted by a foundation of justice. Such visions of mutual cooperation between the nobility and peasantry were no longer realistic after 1848, when the emancipation that reformers such as József Eötvös had worked so hard to attain dissolved the legal ties upon which feudal institutions were founded. Eötvös's *irányregény* (*Tendenzroman* — novel advancing a cause) is the product of a distinctive era in the class relations of the Habsburg empire. The cooperative effort he sought came about only three years after publication of the novel with the outbreak of the 1848-1849 Revolution. The failure of the Revolution to guarantee the newly emancipated serfs the political, economic, and social resources they needed in order to survive without the support of their noble protectors explains much of their continuing and intensifying misery as the nineteenth century progressed.



The landless peasants portrayed in Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's *Das Gemeindekind* (1887; *The Child of the Parish*, 1893) bear witness to the fact that conditions among the lower classes of rural East Central Europe had not improved by 1887, the year of the novel's publication. Ebner was well aware of the continued need for reform to improve the lot of the agricultural proletariat. She cared deeply about the suffering that went on among the destitute masses that populated the villages of Moravia.<sup>26</sup> Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, from an influential aristocratic family just as Eötvös had been, did not learn to speak German while growing up. Instead, she spoke Czech and French. Thus even though a member of the privileged aristocracy, she was in a good position to reach the local Moravian population — at least that percentage who were literate — in their own language. But this was not Ebner's goal. Her ambitions were not so much public as they were personal in nature:

I was still a young girl, almost like a child, my dreamlike views, my likes and dislikes changed like April weather, but one thing stood clearly and firmly in my mind: the conviction that I shall not walk this earth without having left behind at least a slight trace of my footprints upon it.<sup>27</sup>

Ebner identified herself strongly with her role as a writer. As her interest in the literary heritage of German grew, so did her desire to master the language, an undertaking supported actively by her cousin and husband, Moritz von Ebner-Eschenbach.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to József Eötvös, who enjoyed ridiculing the contemporary critics who found fault with his writing, Ebner was anxious to gain critical acceptance.<sup>29</sup> In this she succeeded: she was granted an honorary doctorate by the University of Vienna in 1900, and enjoyed critical acclaim as she rounded out her long literary career.<sup>30</sup> *Das Gemeindekind* was and is regarded as one of her greatest works. But in spite of the harrowing account it gave of peasant suffering in rural Moravia, it was not intended to induce the drastic social change needed to improve a tragic situation. Thus while the topic of the novel may revolve around democratic concerns, it was not constructed, as *A falu jegyzője* was, to arouse democratic appeal. Because Ebner composed *Das Gemeindekind* in German, it was inaccessible even to those literate Moravian individuals who happened only to read Czech. And it was published not in Prague or even Vienna, but in the German capital Berlin, thus entirely outside the Habsburg monarchy of which Moravia was a part.

It is as though Ebner-Eschenbach did not regard the monarchy's ruling classes as capable of implementing effective social reform programmes. Her message was directed at outsiders and intellectuals, rather than at the reformers who, in her mind, did not exist. Ebner's reaction to the injustices of rural Habsburg society effectively mirrors that of many of her contemporaries: resignation and melancholy. As Claudio Magris observes: "Injured by the injustices of her world, Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach forgoes fighting against them and flees into harmony and inner peace, into a troubled plea for love and goodness."<sup>31</sup> This response was shared by a number of Austrian and Hungarian authors, including Elek Gozdsdu in his story collection *Tantulusz* (1886), and Ödön Iványi, author of the novel *A püspök atyafisága* (The Bishop's Relatives, 1888).<sup>32</sup> In the case of *Das Gemeindegut*, Ebner ended her incisively critical portrayal of the Moravian village of Soleschau by tying all of the loose ends up into one peaceful, harmonious knot. Pavel Holub overcomes the hardships he experienced throughout his youth, and not because a group of caring, social-activist nobles comes to his aid, but on the strength of his own physical and emotional resources, of his own inner goodness. Thus the only prescription Ebner offered the suffering peasants of her homeland was the tenuous hope that they could improve their lot through their own moral and physical strength.<sup>33</sup> There was no realistic programme for social reform, no practical advice on how Moravia's rural proletariat might emulate as a group the inner strength that enabled rare individuals to rescue themselves from misery. The linguistic and artistic isolation of the aristocratic author from the peasant world she portrayed, the absence of a programme that would engage the ruling classes in a viable reform process, are symptomatic of the dislocation that occurred in East Central European society once the feudal ties linking nobility and peasantry had been dissolved. By this time, the anomie afflicting the lower classes had extended to much of the aristocracy, which was caught up in its own economic and political life-or-death struggle.

The changed social world of 1880s Austria-Hungary is mirrored in the class relations presented in *Das Gemeindegut*. While the serf Viola is surrounded by a network of advocates in the face of persecution, Pavel Holub is repeatedly deprived of the guardians whose help means most to him. Within the first chapter of the novel, he loses his father and mother. In the second, his only sibling, Milada, is torn away from him. Vinska, for years the sole object of Pavel's attraction, abandons him for the mayor's son, Peter. Schoolmaster Habrecht helps Pavel through some of his most difficult struggles only to abandon him in the first fragile stages of his quest for financial and social independence. Pavel gives up Slava to his friend Arnost, because the community has destroyed his

ability to enter into a marital relationship. Milada, Pavel's guardian angel, dies after a short life of senseless hardship and toil in the convent.

This repeated loss of personal advocates is paralleled by the persistent failure of agents of social authority to ensure the well-being of Pavel and, by extension, of the peasantry. There are three principal agents of authority in *Das Gemeindekind*: the community, the church, and the nobility, and each of them fails utterly in its task of looking after the social welfare of the villagers. Ebner-Eschenbach gives a shocking demonstration of this early in the novel, when she describes how the community leaders, doing everything they can to pawn their responsibility off on someone else, finally decide to leave the abandoned Pavel with one of the most notorious families in the village, the drunken herdsman Virgil and his murderous wife. The community fails to see that Pavel receives proper clothing and schooling, allowing him to run around shoeless and in rags and turning a blind eye to Virgil's exploitation of the boy as cheap labour for the guarding of the community's stock animals. Later, when Habrecht presents a perfect solution for Pavel's situation by offering to take him in himself, the mayor is too consumed with his own problems to authorize the arrangement. Pavel must take matters into his own hands, and lives with the schoolmaster at the cost of persecution and harassment.

Not only does the community fail to do Pavel justice, it also fails to prevent him from suffering injustice. When Peter accuses Pavel of poisoning his father to death, the authorities mismanage the case so badly that the accusation is actually held up: the judge assumes Pavel's guilt even before he enters the courtroom; the court chemist's substitute declares on the basis of a botched test the presence of poison in the mayor's stomach. Pavel must waste two months of his life in jail for a non-existent crime. Pavel fares no better in civil conflicts. After risking his life to rescue Peter in the locomobile accident, Peter and the tavern owner conspire to force Pavel to pay for the tavern owner's new fence. The mayor, though convinced Pavel is being done a great injustice, is too weak to prevent it. Pavel must pay, and so he does. The community is guilty at every turn of compromising Pavel's welfare. They overcharge him for the pitiful plot of land he buys for his house. They sit by and do nothing when vandals ruin his crops and destroy his building materials. They deprive him of a decent education. They suspect him of every wrongdoing committed in the community.

The church does no better. Over and over again Ebner insists on the ill-will of the village priest towards Pavel. The most striking instance occurs on the day of the mayor's death, when Pavel meets the priest, who is on his way back from the mayor's house to the church, bearing the chalice in his hands: "Pavel sank to his knees before the holy viaticum,

and the priest, who was passing by him, glanced over him with a look so full of damnation and contempt that he cowered in fear. . .<sup>34</sup> The priest blindly assumes Pavel's guilt in the "murder" of the mortally ill mayor.<sup>35</sup> When, in a later episode, Pavel turns over the youthful vandals — who have been sabotaging his house-building — to the priest, the priest gives them nothing but a slap on the wrist, and the vandalism continues as before. It is all this supposed moral authority can do to admit that Pavel has suffered unjustly at the hands of the community. The recognition does nothing to amend his failure to provide Pavel with the spiritual nurturing and humanitarian assistance expected of a priest.

Pavel's position with regard to the convent that harbours his sister Milada says much about the failure of the church to look after its members. Access to the convent is so severely restricted as most often to be impossible. Even once he finally gets inside, Pavel is confined to a prison-like chamber isolated from the rest of the building. The nuns there treat him not with Christian warmth and charity, but as unsympathetic, judgmental authorities whose hearts are as inaccessible as the building they live in. Their disinterest in alleviating Pavel's suffering and destitution is highlighted when they refuse to find a place for him in the convent. Pavel explains his impossible situation with clarity to the Mother Superior: "For God's sake, keep me here, don't send me back to the village. . . My Milada says that I should become good, in the village I can't be good . . ."<sup>36</sup> He supports his claim that society makes it impossible for a boy like him to resist wrongdoing with evidence that would convince the most cynical courtroom judge. Yet the Mother Superior, whom Ebner describes as "endlessly pious, endlessly indifferent,"<sup>37</sup> refutes the obvious with hair-raising ease: "Go, my child, . . . go with God and consider that, wherever you walk, you walk beneath his eyes and his protection. And when he is with us, what can the people do against us?"<sup>38</sup> The church is anything but a helper in time of need. It merely flees in the face of trouble, leaving Pavel precisely where he had been before gaining entrance to the convent: destitute and miserable.

Ebner-Eschenbach's portrayal of the relations between the baroness and the villagers dependent upon her is fascinating. The baroness herself presents a wonderfully suggestive caricature of the Habsburg nobility in the 1880s. She is elderly, extremely nearsighted, and walks with a noticeable limp. Yet in everything she does and says, she preserves the air of authority the nobility continued to claim even in the final death throes of its hold on political power. Her motto is: "Alles wie immer," "Everything as it always was."<sup>39</sup>

Ebner's description of the festivities on St. Aegidius day provides a brilliant caricature of the hollow rapport between the baroness, who

surrounds herself in meaningless pageantry, and the poor villagers who gather to meet her:

The Lady Baroness, who otherwise regardless of the weather scurried and tottered humbly to church on foot, today rode the five hundred paces from the castle, in the greatest pomp and procession. Jakob and Matthias on the coach-box, suggestive of majestic examples of ornamented livery, in blue tailcoats with yellow stripes across the back, with yellow vests and lapels, the white, cucumber-shaped horses in heavy harnesses studded with silver. And in the spacious "swimmer" the aged, tiny, half-blind Lady, who greeted in a haphazard manner to the left and right and thanked with a friendly nod of the head many a ruffian who stared her unabashedly in the face, and allowed many a deferential greeting to go unanswered. . .<sup>40</sup>

The peasants assemble *en masse* before the church and greet the baroness's arrival with excitement. Yet the emptiness of the goodwill displayed on both sides is underscored in Ebner's account of the baroness's misdirected greetings:

An unmarried woman was asked about her child, a young husband about his sweetheart, but that harmed nothing, it only enhanced the joyful mood that could express itself unreservedly. The manorial lady enjoyed the game and forgave it, even when it was at her own expense, because she knew that she was basically highly esteemed by the people — and that was her strength. The baroness did not doubt that the people cheated and robbed her wherever they could, but she forgave them the dishonesty, because she knew she was loved by them — and that was her weakness.<sup>41</sup>

Appearance and reality do not meet in this outmoded social confrontation. Not only was peasant-noble cooperation sincere in the fictional world of Eötvös's novel, *A falu jegyzője*, it also existed on a major scale in the real world of revolutionary Hungary. The alienation of the peasantry from their former noble protectors in the era after the 1868 Compromise is revealed in all its blind cruelty in *Das Gemeindegeld*. There is little more than hollow symbolism linking the villagers with the baroness. Nor have any new social ties emerged to replace the loss of

feudalism. The result is a dislocated, anomic society where stability and tradition have become mere chimeras.

Yet the spirit of the pre-Emancipation serf-noble rapport lived on in Habsburg memory.<sup>42</sup> Ebner gives evidence of a generation gap that helped the aristocracy preserve the veneer of its waning authority. It is none other than Pavel's greatest advocate, the schoolmaster Habrecht, who represents the old guard in his rapport with the aged baroness. The respect he demonstrates to her at their meetings is worthy of the most submissive hound dog. Habrecht tries desperately to get young Pavel to follow his example, prompting him to fold his hands in supplication, to call the baroness "Your Grace" instead of "you."<sup>43</sup> But Pavel is so utterly divorced from the noblewoman who supposedly looks after him that he has no concept of the deference historically shown by peasants to their upperclass superiors. After killing the baroness's peacock, he refuses to ask forgiveness, instead secretly hoping that the chandelier under which the fragile old lady stands will fall down and crush her.<sup>44</sup> Pavel's disregard for the nobility is not a fluke — it is Habrecht who, by living in the past, presents the exception. His replacement, for instance, the new schoolmaster Georg Mladek, gives a modern reaction to his predecessor's recommendation that he announce himself to the baroness:

"Gladly, if she's young and beautiful. Otherwise, I have nothing to do with baronesses and no business in their castles. . ."

"But," Habrecht asserted, "courtesy requires. . ."

"Not for everyone — I, for example, have no prejudices "<sup>45</sup>

Ebner says the most about late nineteenth-century Habsburg peasant-noble relations through her protagonist. The first meeting between Pavel and the baroness occurs early in the novel, and reveals how prejudiced the old noblewoman is toward the neglected orphan. It is with utter heartlessness that she consigns Pavel to the wretched life of a village ward: "he certainly deserves to be a child of the parish."<sup>46</sup> The contrast here between Pavel's and Viola's situation is enlightening. Residents from all over Taksony county come to the aid of Viola, the robber, the murderer, in order to rescue him from certain execution, and it is the richest nobles who often provide the most crucial assistance. Pavel, on the other hand, the abused child whose worst crime is the stealing of cherries, is treated from day one like a murderous robber and willfully doomed to a life of misery. In a period of only forty years, the relationship of the nobles to the labourers who worked their land has

deteriorated from one of support and advocacy no matter what the circumstances to one of disinterested cruelty.

It takes many years for the baroness to give up her assumption that Pavel Holub is an incurable criminal. Even when she does, her kind feelings toward the *Gemeindekind* are inconsistent at best. The good deeds she does for him are selfishly motivated and also misguided. As she nears her death, the baroness is anxious to have some assurance that there will be Christian souls lifting up prayers for her sake once she leaves her earthly life. After years of watching Pavel suffer from the multiple injustices of poverty, abuse, prejudice, and exploitation without so much as lifting a finger to help him, the baroness presents him with a valuable piece of land merely because he offers to pray for her in the next life. The gift, while generous, is destined to do Pavel as much harm as good, for as the baroness's estate-agent observes, she "has unfortunately allowed her magnanimity to carry her away. The gift is far too considerable, and must arouse envy among the village residents toward the recipient, and discontent toward the noble benefactress."<sup>47</sup> The priest agrees with this assessment, and the prophesy indeed proves accurate. The peasants vandalise Pavel's fields as never before. It is all he can do to raise a crop on his new land.

The one thing Pavel most needs from the baroness: permission to visit his sister during her illness, she denies him. In fact it is the robbing of the only family member left to him during his childhood, Milada, that is the greatest wrong done to Pavel by the baroness. Throughout the novel, Ebner-Eschenbach insists upon the importance Pavel attaches to his sister. Shortly after their separation, he has nightmares about her and is profoundly anxious about her safety. He even tries to "rescue" her from the baroness's castle. Later, he relies on Milada's support and advice as he struggles against the difficulties in Soleschau that drive him to sin and crime. Any contact with her, no matter how insignificant, means the world to him. Yet he is continually forbidden access to her. The baroness did not take Milada so much out of charity as out of a desire to have an advocate in the Catholic church. Her love for the girl is excessive and selfish in nature. She repeatedly refers to Milada as *mine*, "my dear child,"<sup>48</sup> ignoring the fact that the girl's mother is still alive. The baroness cares no more about Pavel's desperate need to have his sister back than she does about the destruction Milada's penance is wreaking on her health. The separation of the siblings is senseless and cruel and exemplifies the hopeless insensitivity of the aristocracy toward the landless peasants who remain under their control. Pavel loses his sister, and Milada loses her life, all because of the blind selfishness of a noblewoman whose "good works" towards the peasantry do nothing but raise her own self-esteem.

It is both amazing and tragic that Pavel Holub's struggle for self-realisation proves successful after all the hardships society has subjected him to: amazing because of the improbability of his success; tragic because of the message it sent to contemporary readers. Both József Eötvös and Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, by the way in which they addressed the plight of the peasantry in their day, mirror the relationship that existed between peasants and nobles before and after the Emancipation. Baron Eötvös was an activist in peasant affairs. Much as the noble landowner took responsibility for the welfare of his serfs during the feudal era, so Eötvös saw it as his role to intervene in the matter of securing for the peasants basic rights and some sort of economic security. The noble protagonists in *A falu jegyzője* behave according to the same principle. The community counters the anomie afflicting the oppressed peasantry with group mobilisation and concerted action for change. They are successful to the extent that, by the close of the novel, the social enemies Lady Réty and Macskaházy are dead, and Nyúzó is stripped of his office and thus of the ability to bring further harm to the community. Eötvös gave contemporary readers the impression that injustice was the work of several evil individuals, and that it would take little more than organised action to rid society of their influence, in order to return justice to those who had so long been deprived of it. This message provided readers with a sense of hope that, *if they acted*, they could succeed in making society better. There remains only the tragic irony that Viola, in spite of the gargantuan efforts undertaken on his behalf, nonetheless dies at the hands of the justice system. His killer is none other than the villainous nobleman Czifra, the criminal-turned-constable, who testifies to Eötvös's contention that the Hungarian justice system before 1848 was little more than an injustice system, administered by criminals — the fictional judges Nyúzó and Macskaházy also indulge in crimes ranging from theft to perjury and fraud. There is nothing inconsistent in Viola's deplorable death. It sent the message that the problems Eötvös was most concerned about remained unsolved. The cooperative efforts of the peasants and nobles in *A falu jegyzője* resulted only in temporary victories. It was up to the readers to build on the record established by the likes of Jónás Tengelyi, Kálmán Kislaky, and Boldizsár Vándory, and to bring about the permanent victories that eluded these fictional heroes.

Baroness Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach cared deeply about Moravia's rural poor. But she was no activist. She created masterful literary works about the peasantry that earned her the respect and praise of the Viennese elite, yet did nothing to alleviate the sufferings of the people they described. Nor were they intended to have any significant practical effect. Caught up in the trials afflicting their own moribund class, the nobles of late nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary had little interest in



providing practical support to the struggling proletariat the Emancipation had created. The lifting of feudal bonds had released them from their obligation to ensure the basic welfare of the agricultural workforce. As dayworkers, labourers, and servants, the former serf population now had to look out for themselves, independent of noble protection. Baroness Ebner-Eschenbach's novels no more helped the peasantry than did the fictional baroness of Soleschau help the members of the Holub family. Full of goodwill, but lacking the resources to improve the lot of the destitute masses, these noblewomen concentrated their energies on self-fulfilment and self-preservation, leaving the peasants to fend for themselves.

That is why Pavel Holub achieves his goal of self-realization in spite of the odds against him. Were he to die as Viola did, it would have signalled a call to action to the privileged German consumers who read *Das Gemeindegeld*. But there was no sense in issuing a call to action to this readership — what could they have been expected to do? Making rural Moravian society better was not the business of these outsiders. It was the business of the suffering peasant individuals like Pavel Holub. Ebner-Eschenbach was dealing in the realm of impossible ideals. If there is any social message at all in *Das Gemeindegeld*, it is that society will change for the better only if the destitute peasants change. That is exactly what Pavel does. No less the victim of bigotry and injustice at the end of the novel than he was at the beginning, Pavel buys personal contentment at the price of his own sweat, blood, and tears. He abandons petty crime for honesty and decency. He adopts an ascetic lifestyle, centred around celibacy and hard work. He learns the art of self-sacrifice, giving his beloved to friend Arnost to marry, and accepting his mother into his home at the risk of social ostracism. The inner transformation that occurs in Pavel Holub is extraordinary. He realises at the individual level what LaCapra, in his discussion of Durkheim and Weber, calls "the birth of a new 'nomie,'" "an ethic of 'this-worldly asceticism' which combined anxiety about one's fate with a rigorous form of individualistic self-discipline and formally rational activity."<sup>49</sup> While LaCapra refers principally to the Protestant work ethic studied by Max Weber, the ascetic lifestyle Pavel adopts as an adult has deep roots in the Roman Catholic tradition in which Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach was raised. The individualised "nomie" with which Pavel counters his anomic environment creates a rational foundation for his existence and restores his ability to attain self-fulfilment. While readers may see a ray of hope in Ebner's implication that even the lowliest, most miserable of individuals, even the hopelessly abandoned and destitute *Gemeindegeld*, possess the capacity to overcome society's most destructive forces, it hardly constituted a practical solution to the catastrophic problems plaguing the

rural masses of East Central Europe. Pavel's transformation is, as far as his Moravian peasant counterparts are concerned, less than impractical: it is useless, because the same message that persuaded German-speaking readers that the destitute peasants of Austria-Hungary could take care of themselves if they just tried did not even reach the rural Moravian public that could possibly have benefitted from learning about Pavel Holub's moral and personal victory.

The chasm separating the Habsburg nobility from the agricultural proletariat during Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's day only widened. The screams of anguish emanating from writers in close contact with the peasants prior to World War I bear witness to the ever intensifying horrors of agrarian destitution and misery. Writers such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (*Volksgericht* [People's Tribunal], 1882) and Zsigmond Móricz (*Sárvány* [Mud-Gold], 1910) describe with naturalistic graphicness the brutal realities of everyday peasant life in the Habsburg territories in the latter years of the monarchy. Such works demonstrate that emancipation was as much a curse as it was a blessing for its beneficiaries, because it granted the peasants freedom without also providing them with the economic and political means to benefit from it. The necessary improvements were tragically long in coming.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Erika Fischer, *Soziologie Mährens in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts als Hintergrund der Werke Marie von Ebner-Eschenbachs* (Leipzig: Ernst Wunderlich, 1939) 22. Péter Hanák provides a detailed description of the plight of the emancipated serfs in the section entitled "Das Fußtavenk" in *Ungarn in der Donaumonarchie: Probleme der Bürgerlichen Umgestaltung eines Vielvölkerstaates* (Wien: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1984) 418-424.

<sup>2</sup>*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. Philip W. Goetz, 15th ed., vol. 10 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1989) 647. For discussion of the role of the bubonic plague in ending serfdom in western Europe, as well as introducing it into Prussia, Poland, and Hungary, see Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1983) 135-140. See also the informative chapter "Why Is There an Eastern Europe?" in E. Garrison Walters, *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1945* (New York: Dorset, 1990) 110-131. Oscar Jaszi singles out Hungary as the most feudal of all European countries prior to 1848 except for pre-partition Poland and tsarist Russia. *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1929) 220.

<sup>3</sup>Some examples: Austria-Hungary unaitook emancipation of the *Kmets* in Bosnia after occupying Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878 (Jaszi 225). In the Russian empire, emancipation occurred in 1861 (W. Bruce Lincoln, *In War's Dark Shadow: The Russians Before the Great War*, New York: Dial, 1983, 36). Alexander Cuza legislated peasant emancipation in Romania in 1864 (Robert Lee Wolff, *The Balkans in Our Time*, rev. ed., New York: Norton, 1978, 81).

<sup>4</sup>Sándor Bródy is perhaps the best example of this. See chapter XVI: "The Metropolitan Experience: the Cult of Illusion," in Lóránt Czigány, *The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature: From the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984) 263-88.

<sup>5</sup>Jaszi 201. See also Robin Okey, *Eastern Europe 1740-1985: Feudalism to Communism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 118-123.

<sup>6</sup>Okey 118-119. Hanák states that the percentage of agricultural workers in Hungary in 1910 was 62 percent (*Ungarn in der Donaumonarchie*, 397). In the same year, according to Fischer (*Soziologie Mährens*, 33), the percentage of rural inhabitants in Moravia was 59.4 percent.

<sup>7</sup>See Czigány 168, and also *A History of Hungarian Literature*, Tibor Klaniczay, ed. (Budapest: Corvina, 1982) 261.

<sup>8</sup>See Arne Novák, *Die Tschechische Literatur* (Potsdam: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1931) 52-53.

<sup>9</sup>See Ernst Alker, *Die deutsche Literatur im 19. Jahrhundert: (1832-1914)* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1969) 179-180.

<sup>10</sup>István Sötér, *Eötvös József*, 2nd ed. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967) 47. Eötvös wrote two essays on Victor Hugo: "A francia drámai iiteratúra és Victor Hugo" (French Dramatic Literature and Victor Hugo, 1835) and "Hugo Victor mint drámai költő" (Victor Hugo as Dramatic Poet, 1837). They are discussed in Sötér, 55-58, as well as in Paul Bódy, *Joseph Eötvös and the Modernization of Hungary, 1840-1870: A Study of Ideas of Individuality and Social Pluralism in Modern Politics* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1972) 16-18. As both Sötér and Bódy report, the influence of Hugo extended to a number of Hungarian authors in the years leading up to the Revolution, including Mihály Vörösmarty and Sándor Petöfi.

<sup>12</sup>Sötér 56. This and all other English translations from Hungarian and German sources, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

<sup>13</sup>See D. Mervyn Jones, *Five Hungarian Writers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 160-161.

<sup>14</sup>Hanák cites a literacy rate of 31.3 percent for 1870 (*Ungarn in der Donaumonarchie*, 344).

<sup>15</sup>See Bódy, 44. *A falu jegyzője* reached English audiences through Otto Wenckstern's 1850 translation *The Village Notary: A Romance of Hungarian Life* (published both in London and Philadelphia), and German readers through Johann Mailath's translation *Der Dorfnotair*, which came out in Leipzig in 1846.

<sup>16</sup>Jones 160.

<sup>17</sup>Czigány 157.

<sup>18</sup>József Eötvös, *A falu jegyzője*, 4th ed. (Budapest: Ráth Mór, 1891) 2:198.

<sup>19</sup>Eötvös 3:202.

<sup>20</sup>See Emile Durkheim, *Le Suicide: Etude de Sociologie*, new ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960) 276-277.

<sup>21</sup>Denis Sinor gives a pointed account of noble exploitation of the lower classes in *History of Hungary*, 1959 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976) 236-241.

<sup>22</sup>"Durkheim failed in *Suicide* to relate his sociological and cultural variables. . . to more specifically social forms of action and reaction. Yet one typical response to anomie and the anxiety it provoked was the attempt to 'reintegrate' experience through collective action and group mobilization" (Dominick LaCapra, *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1972, 154). This is precisely what Eötvös proposes through the example of the figure constellation in *A falu jegyzője*. LaCapra suggests further that, in a society burdened by anomie, anxiety and isolation unite even socially unequal individuals in a fundamental human equality that may serve as "motivation for the creation of a just society" (170). Eötvös accomplishes this symbolically by allowing the reform-minded Tengelyi to be deprived of his noble status and united with the mistreated social outcasts in the Taksony county prison.

<sup>23</sup>Eötvös 1:122.

<sup>24</sup>See Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, L. A. Manyon, trans. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961) 219-230.

<sup>25</sup>Eötvös 1:247.

<sup>26</sup>Helga H. Harriman, introduction, *Seven Stories by Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach*, trans. by Helga H. Harriman (Columbia: Camden House, 1986) xxi. Danuta S. Lloyd focuses on the role of social criticism in Ebner's works in "Dorf and Schloß: The Socio-Political Image of Austria as Reflected in Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's Works," *Modern Austrian Literature* 12 (1979): 25-44.

<sup>27</sup>The statement is from Ebner-Eschenbach's *Aus einem zeitlosen Tagebuch* (1916). Translation is quoted from Danuta S. Lloyd, "Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach," *Major Figures of Turn-of-the-Century Austrian Literature*, Donald G. Daviau, ed. (Riverside: Ariadne, 1991) 109.

<sup>28</sup>See Harriman, xiii-xv.

<sup>29</sup>Eötvös was perfectly content to sacrifice aesthetic quality in his works if it meant that they would better serve the interests of social reform. He admired in a writer: "the self-denial, with which he, who could find diamonds in the depths of his heart, preferred to break up his field with a sharp plow, because he felt that with this work he could do less for his own glory and more for the good of mankind. . ." *A falu jegyzője*, 2:73. The entire lengthy paragraph from 2:71-74 gives an excellent account of Eötvös's views concerning the optimal role of the writer in society.

<sup>30</sup>Harriman xvi.

<sup>31</sup>Claudio Magris, *Der habsburgische Mythos in der österreichischen Literatur* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1966) 154.

<sup>32</sup>See Czigány, 243-244.

<sup>33</sup>Danuta S. Lloyd, "Waifs and Strays: The Youth in Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's Village Tales," in *Views and Reviews of Modern German*

Literature: *Festschrift for Adolf D. Klarmann*, Karl S. Weimer, ed. (Munich: Delp, 1974) 50.

<sup>34</sup>Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, *Das Gemeindegeld* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1985), 89.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 136, 137.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>A number of authors indicate that it was more than just the spirit of feudalism that lived on in late nineteenth-century East Central Europe. Hanák asserts that, for the lowest classes of agricultural workers in Hungary, the dissolution of feudal ties amounted to little more than a legality. Individuals who made their living working on the huge noble estates were treated much the same as the tenant farmers and servants of the feudal era (*Ungarn in der Donaumonarchie*, 418-419). Fischer explains that, in Moravia, the landless villagers continued to depend upon the manorial lords for their material and legal welfare (*Soziologie Mährens*, 76-77, 84). For analysis of how the perpetuation of feudal institutions in Austria-Hungary after 1848 undermined social development, see Jaszi 220-239.

<sup>43</sup>Ebner-Eschenbach 49, 51.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 51, 201.

<sup>49</sup>LaCapra 181.