

Mikuláš Dohnány: Musings

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The work of Mikuláš Dohnány (1824 – 1852) represents an important development in the history of Slovak literature, artistically one of the most heterogeneous contributions to Slovak literary Romanticism. Dohnány is a member of the Romantic generation who came from the Levoča circle of writers significantly influenced by the activity of Ján Francisci. We can find in his work all of the key motifs that characterise this circle and indeed this Romantic school.

Only two of Dohnány's works were published during his lifetime: *The Podmaníns* (1848) and *History of the Slovak Uprising in 1848* (1850). The rest of his work appeared in contemporary periodicals, while most of his poetry remained in manuscript or in handwritten student magazines until 1968, when Rudolf Chmel edited the first published anthology of his work. The improvised and incomplete work of this author includes poems, which seem to be conventional in the contemporary context and meeting the aesthetic demands of the Slovak Romantic school, but with echoes of romantic individualism or Byronism.

Jaroslav Vlček notes that “the Dohnány's real world was that of deep ideas, thundering emotions, great images of modern melancholic poetry”.¹ He regards him as the “most profound” of the inner circle of true Slovak romanticists, in which he includes Viliam Paulíny-Tóth and Samo Bohdan Hroboň.² Štefan Krčméry went as far as to call him “a pure Byronist”.³

Most notable among the texts inspired by romantic individualism with restless and boisterous lyrical subjects, which were misunderstood by the outside world, are his poems *Improvisation* and *Dream*. The first was published in 1846 and alludes to a part of Mickiewicz's *Dziady* with the same title: scene 2 in part 3. Dohnány's poem *Improvisation* is characterised by romantic exaltation in a number of exclamations and imperatives. The organising principle is the lyrical subject, which undergoes a process of emancipation, self-awareness or self-definition and transcendence in aspiring to romantic titanism:

*Oh, my Spirit! My Spirit! you are at the heart of the world.
In you is the world reflected
and you are flying above in the skies.
And in the Soul is the beauty of the worlds painted!*⁴

¹ VLČEK, Jaroslav: Romantikovia. In: *Dejiny literatúry slovenskej*. Turčiansky Sv. Martin : Matica slovenská, 1933, p. 190.

² Ibid., p. 183.

³ KRČMÉRY, Štefan: O Byronovom Manfredovi a jeho slovenskom preklade. In: *Výber z diela IV*. Bratislava : Slovenské vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry, 1955, p. 318.

⁴ Duch môj! Duch môj! ty ohnisko sveta! / Ako sa v tebe celý odbleskuje, / tvoje krídlo po výšinách lieta / a v duši krása svetov sa maľuje!

This updates a romantic notion of the “land-soul” and creates a parallel to the indomitable natural phenomena of elements that act outside of the reach of human civilisation, and the restless soul of a romantic unstable subject with its uncontrollable dynamics:

*You nurture
the wind and the blizzards,
the thunder and the storm.
You are in love
with the stormy seas
and blazing skies.⁵*

The lyrical subject in the poem *Dream*, which according to R. Chmel dates from 1850 or no later than early 1851, is conceived similarly. The poem is followed by a letter, probably addressed to Emília Jurkovičová, Hurban’s sister-in-law, whom Dohnány loved; but his feelings were not requited, thus the love was platonic. Through the two epigraphs which introduce the poem, the author alludes to another of his contemporary poetic inspirations and authorities, Janko Kráľ. The subject, a restless and dissatisfied young man, can be considered a self-stylisation of the author. “Strange Mikuláš” very much resembles “strange Janko”: he comes from an aristocratic family but what he likes most is spending long hours alone, meditating amidst nature.⁶ Loneliness is thus transformed into isolation, society’s astonishment into eternal incomprehension:

*At home, he does not utter a word,
he escapes from meetings and parties to the woods –
mother sighs and cries, unable to help herself.
Why does this boy of mine walk in the forest:
is he thinking about something good or bad while there?⁷*

The sequence depicting a complicated lyrical subject with its dreams is inscribed within a scene telling a dream to a woman with whom he is intimate, a potential partner. The retold dream is then divided into several sequences by means of relatively mechanical insertions (“*Vtom sa divadlo videnia zmenilo...*”/Then the theatre of vision changed...): images of the glorious past of the Slavs, the return of a prodigal son to the family and his announcement of a great future for the nation, incomprehension and repeated isolation, an apocalyptic vision of a battle and a pensive youth amid a battlefield, and eventually a final sequence with an amatory subtext, ending with the invocation of an unfulfilled, platonic love and the subsequent dawn.

⁵ Vietor a víchricu, / hrom a blýskavicu / v sebe prechovávaš – / v zbúrenom mori, / v iskriacej zori / zaľúbenie mávaš!

⁶ Dohnány writes in a letter to Ondrej Holka (6 March 1851): „Loneliness does not kill me. I seek it out, not finding consolation in noisy company.“ (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, 9. 45).

⁷ Doma celé dni slova neprerečie, / zo spolkov, zábav on do hôr utečie – / mať vzdychá, plače, pomôcť si nemôže. / Prečo ten šuhaj do hájov chodieval, / či tam na dobré, či na zlé myslieval?

However, Mikuláš Dohnány's romantic individualism is only one of his positions and forms of writing. Poems carrying the seeds but also the more widely-ranging ideas of Dohnány's route to messianism appeared almost simultaneously with these romantically exalted texts. Thus these are not later stages of his work to be discussed in terms of author's development, but concepts developed in parallel; in a way, he was a split personality.

An early example of this direction is the poem *Word* (1846). We can find in it one of the constitutive signs of romanticist messianism: the motif of the predestination of the Slavs, their historic mission to regenerate humankind through a spiritual principle. The motif of the expectation of a great historic change, the arrival of the historic era of the word, appears in the poem. The bearers of this renaissance are the Slavs:

*Slavs, new people of the world,
you are named after the word of creation,
you know its power, its heavenly delight,
you bear it in your souls and minds,
you are aware of its world-creating power
and there lies our strong belief and assistance!*

*Tell the world of its eternal reign,
It awaits you, seeks you,
melt that hard, cold bosom of ice,
until belief in the holy word enlightens you!⁸*

As can be seen, this motif, regarded as one of the most significant messianic concepts in Slovak Romanticism, appears in a well-developed form in the work of Mikuláš Dohnány several years before the 1848 – 1849 revolution.⁹ This is one of many reasons why the debate on the genesis of Slovak messianism cannot be seen solely as a consequence of the post-revolution depression or in terms of ideas imported from Poland.

The previously mentioned cycle of Dohnány's texts is further extended by his poem *The Enchanted Land*. Dobšinský mentions this work in his manuscript on Slovak Youth in Levoča in his roundup of the academic year 1844 – 1845, from which we can deduce that it was written no later than 1845. It is interesting mostly because of the development

⁸ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Slovo. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 64. [Musings]: Slovania, nové sveta pokolenie, / od tvoriaceho slova sa voláte, / vy jeho silu, nebeské nadšenie, / najhlbšie v duši a myslí poznáte, / poznáte jeho svetytvoriacu moc / a v ňom je naša silná viera, pomoc! / Zvestujte svetu večnú jeho vládu. / No na vás čaká, po vás sa obzerá, / roztopte tvrdé, chladné prsia z ľadu, / až vás ožiari svätá slova viera!

⁹ Dohnány's megalomaniac visions of the Slavs' future later abated and on 18 May 1850 he writes in his diary: "My ideas are now settled. Now I know and see with certainty that our ship broke its moorings and the river of Slavic life captured us... now not only the fall with me. Now I only see the broad sea in front of me – and behind it the eternal Himalayas of Slavic happiness! It will be only our sons who will reach those Himalayas but we shall – no fear – reach their foothills." (*Listy a denniky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin: Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 93).

of the “enchanted land” motif, one of the themes typical of the works of the Levoča School. The original fairy-tale theme represents here an allegoric land of “people turned to stone”.

*The large, forlorn and vast field
stretches from sea to sea.
As at the cemetery, the hills are naked.
It is as forlorn as a garden without a flower.
And in the large, forlorn country,
the dark night lasts for a thousand years.
Only thunder brings a flash of light to the valley,
and casts a sad light on people and graves.
This is a country under a spell, its people turned to stone,
evil spirits and spectres are roaming around here.¹⁰*

The land and its people are thus balanced between life and death. The loss of the soul caused temporary loss of consciousness, depicted as sleep with indications of hibernation (renunciation of life and surviving bad conditions for the sake of living in the future). The idea of the Slavs’ predestination, their exclusivity and even being God’s choice is present in the metaphor of lightning as God’s spirit, the holy fire leading the Slavs. This contributes to lifting the spell from the land, which is carried out by a prophet-like old man. Stepping from the grave he redeems the Slavs from the eternal curse through resurrection:

*He sprinkles the graves with a silent prayer,
and he takes not even a step:
when they waken from their eternal sleep,
they, the people under a spell, leave their dark graves.¹¹*

If we pursued the a romantic idea of the land as soul, then the enchanted land is an allegory of the Slovak soul without God’s spark, the deadened soul without its own identity, without the possibility of actualising itself through the “word”. The potential for an immense power able to secure redemption thus results from a connection of God’s eternal wisdom with the wisdom of ancestors, represented by the old man.

The last poem that we shall deal with in this roundup of developmentally interesting motifs in Dohnány’s work is *The Son of Tatra* (1846). As in the case of Ján Botto’s

¹⁰ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Zakliata krajina. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 34: Široké, pusté a ohromné pole / od mora k moru sa tiahne, rozkladá. / Ak’ v cintoríne kopce sú tu holé. / Taká je pustá bez kvetu záhrada. / A v tej pustej ohromnej krajine / od tisíc rokov tmavá noc panuje. / Len keď zahrmí, zablyсне v doline, / ľudí a hroby smutne osvecuje. / To kraj zakliaty, skamenelí ľudia, / tu zlí duchovia a mátohy blúdia.

¹¹ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Zakliata krajina. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 35: S tichou modlitbou začne kropiť hroby / a kde pokropil, sotva krok urobí – / už von stávajú zo spania večného / ľudia zakliati, von z hrobu tmavého.

“earthly victor”, the “son of Tatras” is a self-stylisation of the poet. Again, we can find in it a reference to God’s plan in which the quality of the Slovak soul manifests itself in an exceptional historic role. Although until now the fact of God’s choice was hidden from the world, the lyrical subject anticipates the coming of a critical situation and transformation of the world order:

*Hidden son of the Tatras! The world does not know
what God has in store for you... (...)
You nurse some kind of secret in your soul,
the fame and greatness of centuries to come,
the world knows nothing of it, it does not have a clue,
once the secret flares out from your soul -- it will know.¹²*

The empire of the spirit is to be formed on the ruins of the ancient civilisations. However, what is most surprising is the form of this empire. Traditionally, the empires of the future represent a reform oriented towards the past: the reconstruction of a myth of some ancient golden era, the return to some Slavic Arcadia, to unspoiled nature and thus to the original state as devised by God. Yet this author, entirely untypically, suggests that the civilisation of the future will have an urban character (“*On the ruins: new, beautiful cities*”).¹³

The flight of a bird, reborn from ashes, gains transcendental potential. It opens up the possibility of passing beyond the borders of this world, being liberated from materialism, “subjecthood”, because its activity is not an autonomous decision but the carrying out of God’s will:

*Spread your wings, son, and from the ashes rise,
fly as keenly as an eagle,
fly where the voices of God and the Holy Spirit call you,
fly over the great, wide world.¹⁴*

We have tried to outline, on the basis of motifs in the above-mentioned poems, Mikuláš Dohnány’s increasing employment of messianic motifs and ideas. It should be said that as well as writing poetry Dohnány took an active part in organising cultural and more generally public life and played a large role in contemporary “subjecthood”. Even as a student in Bratislava, he was exceptionally active. He spent four years studying hard but also writing, translating, and collecting songs for Francisci’s *Prostonárodný zábavník*/Folk Amusement Magazine. After moving to Levoča, he took part in student assemblies,

¹² DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Syn Tatier. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 57: Tajný syn Tatier! Neznámo to svetu, / čo ti Boh súdil... (...) / Máš ty dač’ tajné v hĺbokosti duši, / slávu a veľkosť budúcich stôletí, / svet o tom nezná, ani to netuší, / až v blesku zlatom z duše von vyletí.

¹³ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Syn Tatier. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 58.

¹⁴ Na krídlach, synak, vyleť už z popola, / pusti sa bystrým ako orol letom, / kde ťa hlas boží a duch svätý volá, / vznes sa nad dlhým a širokým svetom.

wrote criticism, but also taught. He helped edit the hand-written journal *Považie/Váh Basin*. He actively participated in the 1848 – 1849 revolution at the rank of officer and after the revolution worked as an editor in Hurban's *Slovenské pohľady/Slovak Perspectives*. According to Oskár Čepán, this “naturally exalted romantic and messianic dreamer wanted at all costs to become a pragmatic exponent of romantic action”.¹⁵ However, he was gradually losing touch with the real world: “Activity as the only link with the real world projected itself into the imaginary spaces of a hypersensitive mind. The dream was becoming a deed and the deed was transforming into a dream.”¹⁶ In his diaries and letters Dohnány himself quite often reflected on his balancing between reality and “ideal worlds”.¹⁷

Musings is considered to be his most outstanding and aesthetically compelling poetic cycle. It was published in three parts in *Slovenské pohľady*, the first twelve “musings” in 1851, while he was still alive, the remainder posthumously in 1852. While Jaroslav Vlček considers them to be “unfinished fragments” which did not have time to “mature into an artistic whole”,¹⁸ Rudolf Chmel perceives them as “formally and conceptually mature”¹⁹, and Ľubomír Kováčik rates them as the capstone of his work because they are “a philosophical reflection on human and national life but most of all on beauty, love and poetry. The highest, divine principle is the love given to every human. The poetry is a prophecy, a testament to beauty and the consolation of the soul”.²⁰

Many characteristics of his heterogeneous texts outlined so far are, up to a point, apparent in this work. On the other hand, *Musings* represents an innovation, a different approach to writing but especially to the world. While his poems of exalted romantic individualism employ a strictly negativist, pessimist attitude to the outside world, to the particular reality, his poems built on patterns of messianic motifs are much more complex. Visions of a utopian future of the Slavs, the arrival of the era of a spiritual principle or the redemption of a land under a spell and of the self-awareness of a nation lacking it previously may well appear optimistic, but this type of optimism always implicitly carries with it an awareness of the current bleak state of the nation and country, of the nature of its spiritual condition. It is thus a typical lyrical substitutive solution, resorting to escapism.

It is then even more paradoxical that the poetic cycle *Musings* is evidence of Dohnány's incredible care and will to maintain a positive approach. This is shown by

¹⁵ ČEPÁN, Oskár: Vizionár praxe Mikuláš Dohnány. In: *Slovenská literatúra*, vol. 38, 1991, Nr. 1, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ In a letter to Emília Jurkovičová from 24 March 1851 he writes: „My worlds are ideal but I do not want entirely to break away from present reality either.“ (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 50). He writes similarly about the failure to appreciate ideal worlds in a letter to Hurban on 26 March: „Our age is too materialistic and narrow-minded to understand these worlds.“ (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 51).

¹⁸ VLČEK, Jaroslav: Revolúcia a reakcia. In: *Dejiny literatúry slovenskej*. Turčiansky Sv. Martin : Matica slovenská, 1933, p. 246.

¹⁹ CHMEL, Rudolf: Mikuláš Dohnány – život a dielo. In: *Slovenská literatúra*, Vol. 14, 1967, Nr. 3, p. 257.

²⁰ KOVÁČIK, Ľubomír: Dohnány Mikuláš. In: *Slovník slovenských spisovateľov*. Ed. Valér Mikula. Bratislava : Kalligram – Ústav slovenskej literatúry SAV, 2005, p. 131.

Dohnány's statements in his literary criticism, specifically in his assessment of Sládkovič's *Marína* and Pejkö's *Sklad rozličných spevov/Collection of Various Songs*. Dohnány praises Sládkovič's composure and positive tone, which motivates the nation. In his view poetry should not worship despair but should evoke positive feelings, offer noble ideas and not limit itself to sensuality.

It is not only in his positive attitude to the world that Dohnány's musings have links with the work of Andrej Sládkovič. In discussing this work, Stanislav Šmatlák stressed its "conceptual depth, rich imagery and [its] 'Sládkovičian' strictness of form".²¹ In this cycle Dohnány employed a very strict form of verse, a stanza used in European Romanticism. However, his was not the traditional octave but the Spenserian stanza consisting of nine lines: eight of ten syllables and the final an alexandrine with a regular diaeresis after the sixth syllable. His rhyme scheme is strictly *ababbcbcc*. The connection of this verse scheme with the musings' genre, in an ancient Slavic context, is also of interest. In a review of Záborský's *Žehry/Lamentations* Dohnány marginally touches on a topic of musings, showing that this genre was natural to his poetic temperament: "To muse means to think, contemplate, to be deeply absorbed in the inner pain of soul."²² Dohnány's *Musings* are in a certain sense ambivalent: on one hand they celebrate beauty, love and life in general, but on the other they are an elegiac song on the impossibility of achieving absoluteness, an expression of romantic desire for what is absent and inaccessible. Despite this positive approach, romantic expressions of grieving, *Sehnsucht* for "higher worlds and romantic homesickness of the soul" permeate into the text.

In the first stanza, Dohnány introduces the theme of the nation-family in a diseased state. He highlights the need to find a way out of the sickness, a release from the curse ("*Oh how long is the desolate death's slumber*"), through its own efforts, not with the help of strangers. The poet considers this problem in more detail in his diary and letters, constantly insisting on the nation's need for dignity, which it can acquire only by means of its abilities and predispositions, not thanks to strangers' interference, which by contrast has a negative or even destructive impact on the local environment.²³ In the following lines he hints at the lifting of the curse thanks to celestial ignition of life through light.

²¹ ŠMATLÁK, Stanislav: Doznievanie romantizmu. In: *Dejiny slovenskej literatúry II*. Bratislava : Národné literárne centrum, 1999, p. 121.

²² DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Žehry Jonáša Záborského. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 153.

²³ „Conscious sons of the nation, standing at the church of science, art and literature, expressing the Slovak vocation, should alert the nation to the danger of going astray and wasting its noble powers in elements of foreignness. The goal of Slovak Perspectives is *to guard over the Slovak nation* and lead it to the higher light of the sun, from the past to it a future, promising it a life of its own: by shaping its mind to its own purposes in humanity and to its need for its original spiritual development, which will be achieved by gazing with its own *eye-spirit* [his neologism] at the world and finding in itself a seed of something higher in future life. – Meanwhile the Slovak mind, used to foreign shallowness, relishing only that which pleases the sensation and senses, enjoys whimsicality and amusement and quite often skims or jumps over, or does not digest, deeper ideas, because of inattention or disregard.” (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 60. Letter to Hurban, 9 April 1851). „Národ sa musí svojou vlastnou vôľou určovať“ (ibid, p. 94, diary entry from 3 May 1851). [“The nation must define itself *through its own will*”.]

Nature's vitality, permanent flux, exuberance, creation and the changing world are contrasted with God's tranquillity.

The fourth stanza introduces to the scene an angel crying over a mother's grave, flying to magical lands, to sources of life and hope. At this point of the cycle, the mythical land, which gives asylum to the innocent, for whom as a counterpart of God's tranquillity "*soul and heart, the peaceful paradise*", appears for the first time. The theme of paradise represents one of the basic building blocks of Dohnány's breaking loose from reality and offering an escapist solution as an expression of his powerful urge to build a refuge, a sort of private asylum amid the hostility of reality. "I will dream away the whole of my life and spend it in musings. At home I succumbed to an idyllic life in my household. This life has much joy and pleasantness. Nature enthral man, everything is beautiful, only people are hideous. Everywhere could be paradise if people wanted to be, if not angels, at least truly *people*."²⁴

The sixth stanza opens a sequence that is thematically connected with the motif of singing: poetry as an expression of the nation's soul. It comes out of the idea of a primal poetic language, defining the character of the nation, and hence the soul of a particular ethnic group lives in song, in poetry.²⁵ Thus the soul of our nation, even in adverse times, during the thousand-year spell of the nation's unconsciousness, lives in song because "*in them the secret voice of nature reverberates/ in them the hidden life of the spirit appears*",²⁶ until its power affects the nation under a spell, when a higher power supervenes. Songs are "*magical tunes*" sung by (God's) nature, which thus activates the process of lifting the spell:

*the one who gave the nightingale its sweet voice,
gave also their sound to the woods, bushes, rivers,
and he sings the eternal song in the soul.*²⁷

The glorified idyllic depiction of nature forms an imaginary circle: God gifted nature with the ability to preserve folk songs and simultaneously, according to contemporary theories, the folk songs are influenced by the specifics of nature because they determine the character of nations. Nature represents the "*combination of all shadows' decorations / in the most famed shadow of the spirit and the soul*".²⁸ The poet depicts nature as the

²⁴ *Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 88. Diary entry, 17 October 1850. He contemplates similarly on 28 October 1850: "If I had the option I would visit countries south and west to see historic nations. But this way I will try to create paradise at home." (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 89).

²⁵ He reflects in a diary entry on 15 August 1851: „They talk of the genius of a nation but they do not know what in fact they mean by it. Our philosophy is not Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, but legends and songs. That is the most profound philosophy, (...) from which we should learn if we want to serve the nation. It lives there because its spiritual life is there.“ (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 101).

²⁶ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: *Dumy*. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 116.

²⁷ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: *Dumy*. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 116: ten, čo sláviky sladkými hlasami / obdaril, šumom hory, húšte, rieky, / budí, tvorí v dušiach i spev večnoveký.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

“veil” of the spirit and soul extended over it in terms of a Christian concept of the incarnation of the spirit in nature. The poet accentuates both principles, male and female, which acquire their initial unity through nature.

The ninth stanza brings an explicit confession of the lyrical subject from its tendency to leave the real world and inclinations to form substitute, alternative worlds:

*Corners of the soul, why do you always guide me
to the realm that many call the realm of dreams?
Of course you will say: that is reality,
and tempt me to enter it once again.*²⁹

The lyrical subject thus succumbs to the allure of romantic illusions and fantasies to escape from reality, from the historic epoch, which is the “*time of base people*”.

The tenth stanza was originally a part of a letter of 24 March 1851 addressed to Emilia Jurkovičová.³⁰ The lyrical subject here directly admits a weakness for romantic torment of the soul, succumbing to illusions and desires for “higher worlds” because in that way the “secret of the world”, the mystery of the beginning, can unveil itself to it:

*I like pain, bittersweet desires
that burn restlessly in my soul
for they reveal the secrets of the world and spirits,
to the one who is devoted to their sweet desire.*³¹

Dohnány thus also touches on the role of poetry and depicts the idealised, exclusive position of poets as “*higher messengers of the deity*”, to whom all the secrets of the world are accessible. Thanks to their poetry the soul is “*carried to higher worlds*”. The essence of poetry is thus in the transcendental. The role of a poet is to mediate, make contact with a “higher world” or even with God. However, these abilities are offset by the permanent restlessness, torment, pain and desires of the lyrical subject, subjectively perceived as a disease that is not treated.

The eleventh stanza further develops the description of the land as an inspirational power, inspiring the soul to creation, the soul “*pours out as pure sounds*”. However, the idyllic description of the seemingly magical country is disrupted by the last line of the fourteenth stanza: “*but desolate man yawns at everything*”.³² This verse is again uttered by Dohnány’s alter ego, a negatively disposed, internally torn, and hollow subject. It can be assumed that it is a gesture of self-stylisation motivated by unfulfilled desire, because

²⁹ Ibid., p. 117: Anjeli duše, čo ma vždy vediete / do ríše, ktorú ľudia snárstvom zovú? / Vy, pravda, že to skutočnosť, poviete, / a túžbu po nej budíte zas novú.

³⁰ *Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 49.

³¹ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Dumy. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 117: Rád ja mám bôle, horkosladké túžby / čo bez prestania v duši plápolajú / bo oddanému do ich sladkej túžby / tajomstvá svetov, duchov odkrývajú.

³² Ibid., p. 119.

the author admits similar feelings of emptiness in a letter to Emília Jurkovičová of 21 November 1852: “Dead and desolate is this life when there is no soul in it to nourish and sweeten it; people walk like shadows, like spectres they confront a soul dreaming of love. Dead and desolate it is around man, mostly because his mind does not find its world anywhere; everything resists and calls to battle a lad unwilling to lower himself to the desolate habits of the emptiness of the everyday.”³³ He also writes about emptiness and lack fulfillment in a letter to Hurban of 11 November 1851: “That eternal desolation, negation in life and monotony has a very bad effect on me and the spirit, which would like to break these shackles, cannot subdue its musings and feelings of passion.”³⁴ It is therefore not impossible that these statements have a deeper motivation.

The fifteenth stanza contains the motif of man as creator. This refers to a Schlegelian idea that it is futile and obsolete to imitate nature in a mimetic sense and to demand to create a “second nature” by imitating its creativity (poiesis). In this view, the author is in the position of creator and performs a sacred act of creation. Imagination offers the possibility of transcendence and connection with a natural entity. In this sequence, we can even find the stressing of two aesthetic categories, beauty and majesty:

*and its majesty sings out in wild nature
and its beauty is revealed in a little flower.*³⁵

While the second lined quoted evokes, mostly through the flower motif, idyllic beauty, God’s love and grace, its antithesis is monumentality exposed in elements as a metaphor of grandness but also of God’s power and ominous infinity. In the last line of this stanza appears the neologism *spirit-worlds*³⁶, expressing “higher worlds”, a spiritual or transcendent area to which the lyrical subject pays attention,

He identifies three groups of people oriented to different values: heroism, love and wisdom. He calls himself a “confessor of beauty”. For him, beauty represents the unity of nature and spirit (“*woven together from secret drafts*”). The beauty (of nature) enchanted people from the beginning of the world and it is in principle a moral category because it consists of the harmony of good and truth.

However, the celebration and definition of beauty ends the calm ode sequence and in the nineteenth stanza the reader is confronted by the notion of poetry’s clairvoyance. After addressing the adversaries of poetry, who understand it as an expression of dreaming, the lyrical subject again presents his concept of its essence:

*In a song, there’s a prophecy, an inkling,
reality unveils itself before her,*

³³ *Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁵ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: *Dumy*. In: *Dumy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 119: a jej mohutnosť v divých živloch čuje / a jej milosť kvietok mu zas javí.

³⁶ Dohnány does not employ neologisms in his poetry as much as S.B. Hroboň or M.M.Hodža but they do appear sporadically: e.g. *duchosvety (spirit-worlds)*, *okoduch (eye-spirit)*, *striebrotoky (silver currents)*, *hromotresky (thunder roars)*; *večnoveký (ever-eternal)*, etc.

*and there's peace and the roar of cannon,
as the deep sound of the morning bells
she heralds a new day for humanity.*³⁷

As already hinted at, the exclusive role of the poet derives from his ability to foretell or prophesy the future, to announce the new day of humanity. It is an ambition to decode a primal, or God's, language encoded in the world in question, in nature, to look into God's plan and „see“ the future. Dohnány uses the metaphor of „drawing the curtain“ for exposing the secret, tasting the truth as an expression of this act. In doing so, the prophetic poetry points at undreamed-of richness and potential of individual subjectivity. To express this vast power he employs exotic motifs such as the „fires of a volcano“ or the „roar of the sea“.³⁸

The lyrical subject refers to transformation of the ancient civilisation into a Christian one, depicting with regret the misery of the „bards of the West“ who, driven by desire for the spirit-world, search in vain for peace. He lists poets who strive for emotion, for an awakening (Petrarch, Kollár, Byron, Mickiewicz) and then eventually in the 24th stanza reaches the essence of poetry and its historic task:

*The song floats above the chaos of the world,
as the Holy Spirit above the misty waste land,
it is the source of young life, a hope,
reality is born out of her secret whispers.*³⁹

The song is presented here as a medium in which the spirit survives in adverse conditions. It has an enormous life-giving, animating potential, enabling the creation of a new world. It is in fact a means of preserving life, of securing (spiritual) survival in the future. The magical ability of poetry to intervene in reality, to change the course of the world with a word, or to be an impulse for cosmogony and create a more perfect variant of the world is stressed:

*When [poetry's] ancient slumber hums,
its sound creating unparalleled worlds,
where clouds and wasteland their silence shared:*

³⁷ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Dmy. In: *Dmy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 120: v piesni sa javí prorockvo, tušenie, / pred ňou sa dejov odkrýva záclona, / v nej tichý pokoj i diel rachotenie; / ako hlas dumný raňajšieho zvona / nový deň ľudstvu predzvestuje ona.

³⁸ Dohnány also points to the duty of a vigilant poet to save his country in his diary, when he describes a dream from the night of 12 June 1851: „People remained plagued by dreams; only a bard cannot, must not, sleep; he stands on guard, about to enter the temple of mother Glory, having sacrificed his own heart to spirituality. (*Listy a denníky Mikuláša Dohnányho*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Martin : Matica Slovenská, 1971, p. 97).

³⁹ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Dmy. In: *Dmy*. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 122: Pieseň sa vznáša nad chaosom sveta, / ako duch boží nad hmlistou pustotou, / z nej život jarý, nádeja vykvetá, / deje sa rodia z jej tajných šepotov.

and there shines the pure glow of the age of humanity,
for the future speaks in words.⁴⁰

This sequence can at the same time be considered the conceptual climax of the cycle. It culminates in images of the resurrection of a land under a spell, through the power of the word, or the sound of a song, which acts here as an incantation, a magic formula, or a divine mantra. This regenerating intervention changes the future of all humankind; those under a spell are rid of their inability to speak and the era of the word begins. The connection of the ideas about the potential of an original language with the expression of God's infinite wisdom in a form of God's plan, whose part is also his selection of the Slavs and their predestination to a grand historic role: to lead humanity to the era of the word ruled by the principle of the spirit.

The final stanzas represent a call to transformation. The lyrical subject also speaks on behalf of its contemporaries, overcoming isolation and expressing the readiness of its generation for the great transformation, the arrival of a new era. It compares the contemporaries to giants, to primeval people who, thanks to the power of the original metaphoric language, were able magically to intervene in reality and change it. The end of the composition is built on the foundation of a transcendental notion of the world's divine enthusiasm and culminates in anticipation of the arrival of "new acts".

The poem is thus idyllic and elegiac at the same time. Moments of exalted subjectivity alternate with the absolutising of the spirit. It is an example of the romantic coexistence of the tragic and idyllic and expression of romantic desire for the absent, unattainable, the desire of the romantic soul for a return to the beginning. It expresses the impossibility of permanently attaining "higher worlds". Oskár Čepán characterised this composition as an elegiac grieving over the passing of a world that "suppresses the absolutes of a 'spiritual realm'".⁴¹

The character of Mikuláš Dohnány's poetic composition *Musings* necessitated at least a brief indication of the motifs of some of his other poems. We considered this necessary mostly because *Musings* represents a kind of synthesis of several forms of Dohnány's poetry and also indicates an entirely new authorial strategy. It is symptomatic that in analysing particular types of Dohnány's texts, we could not avoid mentioning poets whose work acted as inspirational impulses. As well as A. Mickiewicz, J. Král', and A. Sládkovič, it is necessary to mention also Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian*, which Dohnány translated and which, as a type of noble natural poetry with an ambition to mediate the creative energy of primeval humankind, also influenced *Musings*. These facts perhaps explain some of the insecurity of the young poet (he died aged 27, probably from a brain tumour) and inclination to accept or even worship his predecessors.⁴² His work is therefore characterised by a certain measure of echoism or eclecticism.

⁴⁰ DOHNÁNY, Mikuláš: Dymy. In: Dymy. Ed. Rudolf Chmel. Bratislava : Tatran, 1968, p. 122: Keď tá zahučí vekovou driemotou / zvukami svety nevidané tvorí, / kde mrak, pustota bývala s nemotou: / v nej čistá žiara slávy ľudstva zorí, / lebo budúcnosť slovami hovorí.

⁴¹ ČEPAN, Oskár: Vizionár praxe Mikuláš Dohnány. In: *Slovenská literatúra*, Vol. 38, 1991, Nr. 1, p. 19.

⁴² Dohnány's fatal attachment to his predecessors was also noticed by Oskár Čepan. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

On the other hand, the work of Mikuláš Dohnány is a prime example of how a poet moved from conventional romantic poetry to the position of exalted romantic individualism and messianism. According to Oskár Čepan, we can on the basis of his work “sketch a process whereby one type of Slovak messianic poetry was formed on a general romantic basis”.⁴³ This shows that the common factor in several messianic projects is an initial titanism invoking activity on the basis of autonomous decisions of a subject on behalf of the whole community. When a titanic act turns out to be unfeasible or fails, the subject tends to isolate himself, passively meditate in seclusion and expect the coming of a great historic transformation. That, however, will not happen because of the autonomous decision of the subject, or the whole collective, but rather through the fulfilment of God’s plan.

Translated by Tomáš Mrva

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⁴³ Ibid., p. 8.