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Kuzmány's hymn “Glory to the Noble” (Sketches for interpretation)

Abstract: The aim of this article is to use interpretative sketches to discover the humanistic semantics of Kuzmány's hymn “Glory to the Noble” which is, from the philosophical perspective, a classic example of Hegel's dialectic triad. The conclusion points to the still valid ideological message of this hymn (today known under the title “Who Burns for Truth”) in the promotion of truth, freedom and equality.

Keywords: literature, Karol Kuzmány, hymn, interpretation, dialectic

The basic principles of the poetics of romantic lyrics are founded primarily on strong feelings and emotions which can be, apart from other genre forms, be expressed by hymns in an artistically effective manner. A hymn uses sublime words to exalt general human values manifested as goodness, nobility and beauty, as an expression of the spiritual life of an individual, a nation and even entire humanity. This form of hymn lyrics is shaped by the nature of the poet's soul which reacts emotionally to the surrounding reality. The best-known hymns and/or lyrics in Slovak literature of romanticism were written by Samuel Tomášik *Hey, Slavs* (1838, in

the Slovak version “Hey, Slovaks”), Janko Matúška *“Lightning O'er the Tatras”* (1844) and Karol Kuzmány *“Glory to the Noble”* (1848).

In several interpretation sketches we will try to explain the poetics of the hymn on the example of the lyrics of Kuzmány's hymn. The roots of this genre date back to ancient times, while in Christianity the hymn also became part of religious rituals such as worshipping God and saints. Kuzmány's hymn is also based on it, although its content is secular. The hymnic pathos did not appear in the works of this poet until the second period of his oeuvre – in the spiritual hymns in which he proclaimed virtue

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founded on faith, love and hope. In religion he saw the cognition of moral goodness, truth and beauty (Kuzmány, 1836, pp. 64–66), which, in broader terms, is identical to the determination of man and humanity. In his study, i.e., the theoretical debate entitled *About Beauty*, Kuzmány sketched romantic aesthetics by assigning art the function of awakening deep feelings of humanity (Hronka, 1836, pp. 61–71). In it, he started from the aesthetics of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831): “For the beauty of art originated and is reborn in the spirit, and the more the spirit and its works are located above nature and its phenomena, the more artistic beauty is above the beauty of nature. From a formal aspect, even an evil thought, which can at any time pass through a person’s head, is more worthy than any part of nature; for in such a thought spirituality and freedom are always present... However, the higher moment of the spirit and its artistic beauty in relation to nature is not relative; namely, only the spirit is truly, internally all-encompassing, so that everything beautiful is truly beautiful only to the extent that it participates in this higher and insofar as it is further shaped by it. In that respect, beautiful appears in the nature only as a reflection of the beauty pertaining to the spirit, as an imperfect, incomplete form, as a way which is encompassed

with its essence in the spirit itself” (Hegel, 1968, p. 10). Kuzmány adopted the concept of the human spirit from one of the philosophical creators of romanticism, but expanded this understanding to include the ethical dimension of man as a social being who is realized in the national collective. In the service of God, he first pays attention to God in order to become stronger in that segment and at the same time to be convinced about the meaning of the work that will become the fulfilment of God’s will. It was from such faith that the hymn “Glory to the Noble” originated, adding a new trait to Kuzmány personality – the ability to react emotionally to events concerning the constitution of the nation. By doing so, he determined a clear direction for poetry – to help people in education, tangible and spiritual culture – which he confirms by saying “to serve one’s people is my entire ability”.

Although the hymn “Glory to the Noble” was published^[2] before the 1848/1849 Revolution, it is not the propaganda in verse as a response to the March Revolution, but a humanistic reflection with possibly Hussite roots – “to burn for truth”. According to Pavol Vongrej, Kuzmány found this key leitmotif of the hymn “during his student days in Germany, when he encountered the letter written by teacher Jan Huss from Kostnica, who had

[2] The hymn was not published separately, but within the article in which Kuzmány presented the activities of the Association, including the names of Bystrica officials. The article was aimed at awakening a broader interest in social activities, and that is why in the conclusion it invites the readers: “Let us help one another in a manly, sharp and courageous way – and God will help us. Let the scum be angry. It used to be like that, it is now and it will be like that in the world. No doubt, it had to be exactly like that. Only sacrifice can bring glory, and even the thorn crown is still a crown. Glory to the noble”. The text was published on 4th April, less than three weeks after the Revolution in Pest and about two weeks after the news about the revolution reached Banská Bystrica (Kuzmány, 1848, p. 734). In the asterisk-marked reference after the text, the author adds: “It can be sung like the German ‘Freiheit, die ich meine’ If we wanted someone from our country to compose the original melody and send it to us, the German song by Max von Schenkendorf ‘Freiheit, die ich meine’ is a students’ song from the Wartburg Festival in 1817, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Luther’s Reformation.

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Photo: Freepik

already served him as an inspiration for the novel *Ladislav* (Vongrej, 2002, p. 32). According to his first manuscript, the hymn was written back in 1846 and entitled "Glory to Courage" (Hučkova, Hmel, 2014, pp. 12–13). The hymn was supposed to be the peak of the author's appeal and invitation to entire Slovak society that truth and nobility should remain the highest values despite numerous unfavourable historical circumstances and huge sacrifice. The hymn is an expression of universal human ideas of democracy which were so specially and precisely expressed by the motto of the French Bourgeois Revolution (1789) „Liberté, égalité, fraternité” (Liberty, equality, fraternity). Shortly afterwards, the

hymn entitled "Who Burns for Truth" was written.

The hymns is a profound humanistic reflection and its roots perhaps originate from the Hussite slogan "to burn for truth". That is perhaps why, owing to this, the first verse "He who burns for truth in holy sacrifice" is still present, because of different political changes, not only in Slovak poetry but also in the entire Slovak national life – as a slogan, as a signal, as well as a hymn of its own. Its other verses have also become the alpha and omega of positive life activities.

Sixteen verses in four stanzas of Kuzmány's poem entered Slovak cultural consciousness in the spirit of the era which brought "a fresh spring

note” to poetry, based on the new codified Slovak language of Ľudovít Štúr. Joining the standardized Slovak language, Kuzmány's poem got a natural expression, thus becoming comprehensible. With a unique poetic appeal, its author invites everyone to live their lives glorifying truth, justice and fairness. For expressing this timeless poetic message, Kuzmány was inspired by German classical philosophy from Kant to Hegel, which he had adopted during his studies in Germany. He was influenced most by Professor *Jakob Friedrich Fries* (1773–1843), who emphasized the importance of direct spiritual virtues related to inner aesthetic-emotional disposition. On that basis, Karol Kuzmány strengthened his own philosophical attitudes in which, not only under the aforementioned influence, but also from his inner motivation and intrinsic personal needs, he inclined towards ethical and aesthetic values both in the life of an individual and the entire nation. He translated those values into the poem “Glory to the Noble” in the form of love for close people, for humanity in general, as well as the search for truth while singing emotionally about its beauty. Kuzmány believed that the emotional and moral side of human life was an important precondition for the unity of spiritual life and a warranty of complex understanding, as he had been taught by Professor Fries, in contrast to Kant and Hegel, and as emphasized by romantic literature too. It was from this belief that Kuzmány's orientation originated towards the exploration of the essence of feelings as a cognitive ability and art as a means of understanding those aspects of reality performing the aesthetic function. Kuzmány's hymnic verses primarily emphasize the human universal struggle for values such as equality, liberty and fraternity.

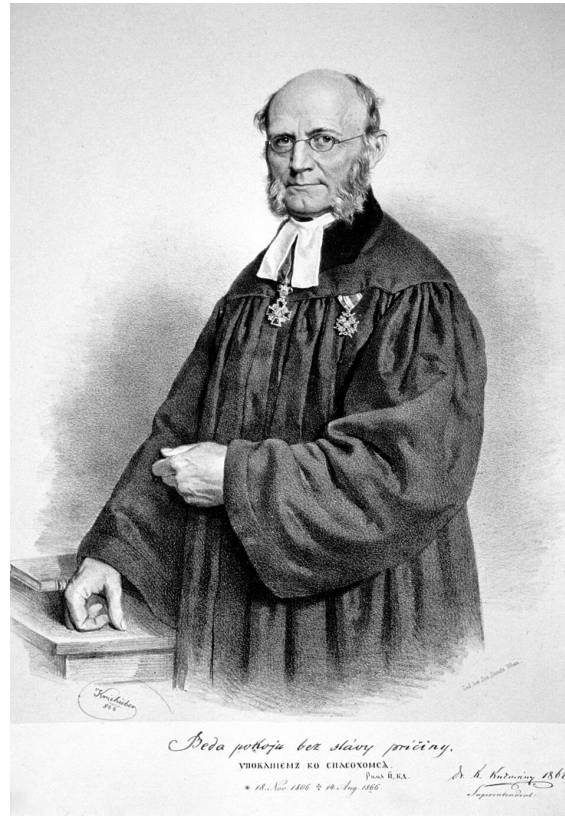
In the 1840s, in the territory under the Tatras, a revolutionary movement began for the realization of these values in social life. This revolutionary movement actually inspired Karol Kuzmány to write the verses by which he primarily wanted to encourage the young generation of Štúr's followers into a fair struggle for the establishment of general human values. That is why the expression “who burns for truth” (subsequently entering the people's consciousness as the title of the poem) was not understood as self-sacrifice in struggle, but primarily as “burning” for noble ideals. It meant a call for a democratic polemic and a dispute about reaching the truth even at the cost of sacrifice. The concept of “holy sacrifice” is here actually a synonym for love that has a chance to win the forces of evil and hatred. These motifs strengthen Kuzmány's position of romanticism. It is a lyrical expression of aspirations, will and decisiveness to put the values of truth, liberty and justice on the agenda – in the Slovak context as well.

The poem-hymn with sublime ideas of beauty, goodness and nobility, in the midst of revolutionary events of society at the time, instilled enthusiasm and courage into all brave rebels. At the same time, in the name of revolutionary ideals, the poem rejected the mundaneness and indifference that are reflected in baseness, weakness, and humiliation. Kuzmány's poetry echoed not only as a hymnic ode to humanity, but also grew into an exclamation of bitterness and warning.

In contrast to other poems from the era of romanticism, this one by Kuzmány does not have a specific lyric hero. By repeating the question “who”, the author does not address anyone in particular – the addressee of his appeal is anonymous. In fact,

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Karol Kuzmány, lithograph from 1866

Photo: Wikipedia

he refers to all those who act so as to raise humanity from slavery, all those who are careful not to take a wrong road but want to be the creators of their own destiny. In poetic images, typical characteristics of the romantic hero are coded and they can be “read” in the whole lyrical context of the poem. The author decided to glorify the ideal hero I his poem, which is emphasized by repeating the introductory phrase “To him my poem will ring with glory” in the final verse of each stanza.

Kuzmány's hymn is not a mere play on words or a search for unusual phrases and images, but a lyrical reflection using more sophisticated vocabulary in order to move the recipient, to win him over and influence him. Using emotional poetic imagery with a strong ethical emphasis, the author spoke to his contemporaries and influenced their opinions as well as actions. He built the strength of his idea on the classic triad structure based on Hegel's dialectic scheme – thesis, antithesis and

synthesis. Hegel derived this pattern from history itself, when he discovered the course of the “world spirit” throughout history. However, Hegel’s dialectic does not need to be applied only to history. In every debate or explication we actually think dialectically.

The influence of Hegelian dialectic is visible in the very first stanza of Kuzmány’s poem “Glory to the Noble”. It is a classic example of the dialectic triad which has its rational logic: the first verse “Who burns for truth in holy sacrifice” denotes sacrifice – death (thesis). However, the second verse “Who dedicates his life to the rights of humanity” is a contrast – life (antithesis). The third verse “Who sheds tears over the injustice of the poor” is a poetic (emotional) supplement to antithesis, while the fourth verse is both poetic and philosophical, and it destroys the previous tension (synthesis), while simultaneously constituting an introduction for a new three-part train of thought. The stanza is a logical ending of the following verses and practically it is completely wrapped in abstract clothing – it is a general human level. It sounds like the glorification of all brave fighters who rose against evil in their defence of human rights.

The second stanza represents a dialectical alternation of the abstract and the concrete. The first verse, “When the cannons thunder, the eagle soars”, indicates a specific direction. The image of the eagle here does not represent a symbol of freedom and unfetteredness, as is typical of Štúr’s poetry, but rather a symbol of the Habsburg Monarchy. The syntagm “the eagle soars” hints at the specific circumstances of the time prior to the revolution. In the following verse with a general meaning “Who gives blood for dear freedom” – in addition to

truth as the key work in the first stanza – Kuzmány emphasizes freedom as another ideal (worthy of sacrifice). The third verse is directly connected to the struggle for freedom, with a specific meaning encoded in the phrase “fire dragon”. Kuzmány captured the motifs of Slovak folk tales, where one of the representatives of evil was a fire dragon. The second part of the verse “who covers the homeland” sounds like an appeal for salvation from the advancing evil. Once again he does not address the “fairylike” hero whose heroic act would break the spell of the “cursed land”. In its former historical position, the Slovak nation was not independent and it did not have its own territory, which was a typical romantic motif of salvation and liberation of the people from centuries-long slavery. To all the saviours, as a sign of victory, the poet sings a “song” that “rings with glory”. Kuzmány’s desire for freedom is a romantic attitude of the poet singing in honour of the imaginary hero who will take the man from the claws of the “fire dragon”.

In the third stanza, the author’s focus is on the concepts of reciprocity and togetherness in a just battle for universal human values. Together with truth and freedom, there is also fraternity as an important ethical dimension of the noble struggle for truth, goodness and justice.

In the last stanza, the poet translates all these motifs into a contrasting image of heaven and hell: “[...] discovered heaven”, “[...] burnt hell”. According to this contrast of heaven and hell, the biblical motif becomes fertile soil for the argumentation in terms of the semantic antonyms: justice-injustice, truth-lie, good-evil etc. The poet associates noble human virtues with heaven, while everything inhuman is associated with hell. In the contradictory valuation

of the heavenly world and the world of hell, Kuzmány shows an inclination towards Ján Kollár's last two poems from *The Daughter of Sláva* (1824) – "Léthé" and "Acheron". Guided by the firm faith in God in defence of truth, freedom, and brotherhood, he calls for absolute respect for God's laws. Thus he adds the fourth value – equality of all before God. The way Kuzmány understood it, God will reward man's righteousness and nobility with heaven. Man can confidently rely on this eternal security.

Behind the romantic exaltation founded on rational logic, the hymn fully conceals the slogans of revolutionary changes in the first half of the 19th century – truth, liberty, fraternity and equality. In Europe's modern history it marked the beginning of the long struggle for the implementation of the ideals of humanity and democracy. The poet's imagery hides the reality of the past times, but with a typically romantic attitude. It reflects "the monument to the past and the foundation for the future" and, at the same time, "the romantic spark" of his poetry. Finally, Kuzmány's hymn become one of the first Slovak poetic expressions of romanticism. This is also supported by the deliberate abandonment of the metrics since, in the author's opinion, such hymns are simply not intended for the entire

people but only to a certain group that has grown up in foreign schools. In its strictness, the metrics was opposed to the perceived social function of the hymn, which could be achieved solely through a natural and generally comprehensive poetic expression. Kuzmány accomplished his goal not only by rich picturesqueness, but also by efficient stylistic means and a clear composition. He used the means similar to the diction of the Old Testament prophets, who draw on the deepest corners of the emotional and often turbulent heart. To awaken the interest of those he addresses, in almost every verse he poses a rhetoric question which at the same time implies the anticipated answer. Apart from senses, it also entices the mind and the spirit. The content of the statement is strengthened in the refrain verse by the use of the anaphora, while one of the shaping means is also the suggestive sound picture. By preferring dark phonemes, he conjures up the impression of words always flowing from the depth, as if the reader from can hear the dull sound of thunder from faraway black clouds. That is why the hymn "Who Burns for Truth" is even today still sable to exalt the festive atmosphere and to act not only on senses but also on the mind, thus deeply penetrating into life, regardless of time and space.

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