

ARTICLES

Myth, Motif, and Motivation: Pavol Dobšinský's Theory and Practice of the Wondertale

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Pavol Dobšinský was a *Štúrovec*, a member of that first generation of Slovak literary figures who gave direction to the nascent Slovak literary movement following Ľudovít Štúr's decisive break from Czech literary language in 1846. Like many others, he was a Lutheran minister, trained in one of the Lutheran secondary schools. His studies began at the lyceum in Levoča in 1840 at age twelve, just three years before its ranks were swelled by students from the lyceum in Bratislava that had been closed by a Hungarian church commission. The reasons for closure were the suspicious activities going on there, including the students' active collecting of prose folklore and Štúr's lectures on folk poetry and prose. Dobšinský soon became one of the most active student collectors of folktales. In 1858, along with Augustín Horislav Škultéty, he began publishing the second collection of Slovak folktales, *Slovenské povesti* (Slovak tales).(1) That same year he went to Banská Štiavnica to become professor at the Lutheran lyceum and editor of the literary magazine *Sokol* (Falcon). The folktales came out serially in small volumes until the sixth and last in 1861 when Dobšinský took a pastoral position in Drienčany and could no longer communicate with his publisher. In the late 1860s Dobšinský led the Matica Slovenská cultural organization's collecting efforts that led to the publication in 1871 and 1874 of two volumes of a collection of Slovak national songs, tales, proverbs and sayings, riddles, games, customs and beliefs, with contributions from Dobšinský in every category. In 1880 he published his own volume, a description of folk customs, beliefs and games, one of the first significant works of Slovak ethnography. The following year, he was finally able to return to the publication of folktales, and by 1883 had published eight volumes of *Prostonárodné slovenské povesti* (Slovak folktales). In all, Dobšinský published just over 150 folktales in his lifetime.

In addition to his collecting and publishing efforts, Dobšinský presented some theoretical observations on the folktale in his *Úvahy o slovenských povestiach* (Reflections on Slovak Tales), published in 1871. This is a major, 170-page consideration of the nature and significance of the wondertale. It is in some ways the culmination of his generation's work on Slovak prose folklore, which had focused primarily on the wondertale genre in its collecting and publishing activities. Perhaps because of his wider collecting efforts, begun while this volume was in preparation, Dobšinský included many other types of folktales in his later folktale publication: humorous tales, novelistic tales, legendary tales and so on. But the fascination was always with the wondertales, which dominated the early publication of tales here as elsewhere in Europe. In this, Dobšinský was following in the footsteps of his Slovak teachers, especially Štúr, and in the traditions they had already established for the interpretation of these tales. Another major influence on Dobšinský's theories is the late Romantic school of the

brothers Grimm, which linked *Märchen* to mythology and founded the mythological interpretation of folktales. Dobšinský did not know the Grimms' work at first hand, but only through the mediation of the Czechs, Karel Jaromír Erben and Ignac Hanuš. Always lurking in the background, as Dobšinský's discussion of myths and tales evokes a picture of the early Slavs, is the pre-Romantic Czechoslav idealization of Slavic antiquities, which drew upon such diverse sources as Nikolai Karamzin's History of the Russian State, Herder's chapter on the Slavs, the Czech forged manuscripts, and any historians, ancient or recent, who made even passing positive comment that could be related to the Slavs.(2) Finally, and perhaps most fundamental of all, Dobšinský's training as a Lutheran minister and his background in Christian theology made it impossible for him to draw certain kinds of conclusions about folktales, in which few today would fail to spot a range of pre-Christian elements.

Here one may question the accuracy of his own statement about his methodology in the introduction to the book. "In these reflections," he says, "I have stepped out into the field to which the tales whisked away my spirit of themselves and by themselves ... Let us begin now to disenchant in ourselves the obvious secrets of our tales, and thus to disenchant those secrets from the tales alone, almost without any other source of assistance or supplement, though we could easily make use of such" [Dobšinský 1871: 5].(3) He thus claims that in conducting his analysis he has ignored any sources other than the tales themselves. The claim to let the tales speak for themselves is crucial to Dobšinský's project, which seeks to fulfill the purpose for which the tales were collected in the first place, beginning when he was a lyceum student. That goal was to discover what the tales had to say about Slovak antiquities. It had been stated first by the real pioneer in the collection of tales, Samuel Reuss, the father of two of Dobšinský's fellow students and a minister in Revúca, for whom Dobšinský later worked as secretary from 1848-55. Reuss himself never ventured any interpretation, as a sufficient number of tales was not available. In 1853 an interpretation of Slavic folksongs was offered by Štúr in his book Q národních písních a pověstech plemen slovanských (On the folk songs and tales of the Slavic tribes), published in Czech by the Matice česká cultural organization. Here he claimed that the evidence of the tales would be consistent with that of the songs, but the evidence would be better preserved, more pure. "If they [the tales] had all reliably made their way to us," Štúr claimed, "we would know the theology and cosmology of our most ancient ancestors" [Štúr 1955: 214, 220-21].(4) Dobšinský believed he had enough tales to venture an analysis. In "disenchanting" the tales to discover their secrets, though, there was little reason for him to distrust the methods and conclusions of his teachers, and his conclusions are consistent with theirs, if no less interesting for that. The claim that he is drawing everything from the tales themselves, however, becomes at times a blatant fiction.

The first section of Úvahy discusses the "Báječnost' povesti," the mythical qualities of the tales. Here Dobšinský distinguishes between these tales and historical legends and thereby delimits the type of historical information one can expect to extract from the tales: they are not a source of historical fact, but only of a historical way of thinking, one associated with the nation's childhood. The reality represented in these tales is one of thought, of the imagination. We understood these tales, he notes, especially well at a particular point in our lives: "Those were the glorious times of our childhood when we thought as children, and pictorial

imagination prevailed over dry reason” [Dobšinský 1871: 8].(5) The tales represent not abstract thought, but pictorial thoughts. One might note how Dobšinský here anticipates something of what Lévi-Strauss had to say about myth in *The Savage Mind*. How then does he view the relationship of these tales to myth? Dobšinský compares them to Greek myths and finds that they are about the same things: about nature and natural phenomena rather than human relations. Such a conception is entirely in line with the solar mythological school’s method of interpreting folktales, built on the work of the Grimm brothers and others, like Max Müller, which dominated tale studies in the middle third of the century, and Dobšinský ends this section with an interpretation of three tales along those lines. He had learned this method of interpretation from the Czechs Erben and Hanuš whose work he cites. In this section, Dobšinský is entirely up to date with the trends in folktale studies in Europe. It is worth noting, however, one difference in Dobšinský’s interpretation: where the Grimm brothers held that folktales were the fragmentary remnants of myth, Dobšinský holds that these tales *preceded* myths [Dobšinský 1871: 17]. The order, however, is not particularly important. Both conceptions allow one to ignore the differences between mythological tales and wondertales and to interpret the latter as if they were disguised forms of the former.

The transition to the next three sections of Dobšinský’s book is worth noting. While on the one hand he declares that the figures in the tales actually represent natural phenomena, at the same time he wants to say the opposite, that the character Dalajláma is not just a symbol of the sun. He argues that the sun is also a symbol of Dalajláma as a god, and proceeds to outline the theology (*bohoveda*), cosmology (*svetoveda*), and anthropology (*človekoveda*) of the tales on that basis. In other words, these sections present a reading of the tales that is inconsistent with the solar mythological theory he has just outlined: if the tales developed as a kind of symbolic language for speaking about natural phenomena (such as the movement of the sun), then the characters of the tales must be taken as symbols of heavenly bodies. To take the sun as a symbol of a character from the tales, then, is to utterly confuse the nature of the symbolic language. The tales cannot be read as a way of learning about the gods, because the gods are there only to teach about the heavens.

If Dobšinský contradicts the solar mythological school and his own first section, however, the method in this section is entirely in line with the Slovak school of interpretation, and its genesis lies in Štúr’s suggestion above: “If [the tales] had all made their way reliably to us, we would know the theology (*bohoveda*) and cosmology (*svetotvorstvo*) of our most ancient ancestors.” For his discussion of the cosmology of the ancient Slavs and their conception of the creation of human beings, Dobšinský refers to various Ukrainian, Russian, and Slovenian mythological tales, which Erben had gathered and published in his study of Slavic mythology. Erben is in fact also the hidden source of almost every conclusion Dobšinský reaches concerning the theology of the Slavs. While he refers to Slovak tales to illustrate what he is saying, it is not the tales that drive his argument, but rather Erben’s article on Slavic mythology in the Czech encyclopedia published by Rieger. Like Erben, he concludes that the Slavs recognized one heavenly god. Erben’s source for this is the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius. Dobšinský illustrates this point with the character of the King of Time from the wondertale of that name. Also like Erben, he marks the dualism of the Slavic gods, the split between good and evil. Erben’s sources are the Russian *Primary Chronicle* and other ancient Slavic texts that give the names of gods, like

Bělboh and Ljutbog [Erben 1870: 603]. Dobšinský points to the witches and dragons that oppose the heroes in the tales. And so he proceeds, illustrating Erben's conclusions with material from the tales. Dobšinský is ingenious in making the wondertales mirror what he has gleaned from elsewhere about the ancient Slavs, but his lack of a distinction between mythological tales and wondertales has him straining throughout to make them agree. Ultimately, too, Erben is not the source for *all* of Dobšinský's conclusions. While Erben spoke of the recognition of a single heavenly god, but went on to describe the many other gods known, Dobšinský concludes that the ancient Slavs were essentially monotheistic [!], and proceeds to list the characteristics of this *praboh* (Ur-god): omnipresence (*všadebyt*), omniscience (*vševěd*), omnipotence (*všemoh*) and so on. Such conclusions flow naturally from his training in theology — how else is one to conceive of a single god after all — but they can in no way be attributed to the tales. It is worth noting here that in his book on Slavic songs Štúr, noting the greater purity and better preservation of the worldview of the Slavs in the tales as compared to the songs, had observed that “that worldview is pantheism, which still has an unbounded authority in the Slavic folktale” [Štúr 1955: 214].(6) However, such assertions were edited out of the first edition at the recommendation of Erben [Štúr 1955: 258]. Had he known of Štúr's authoritative opinion, Dobšinský might have been forced to reconsider the question of monotheism.

Just how authoritative Štúr's example was can be seen further in the next three sections of the book, which analyze “Poměry člověka k božestvu, k ľudstvu, k přírodě” (The Relations of Man to the Godhead, to Humanity, and to Nature). Štúr's book on the Slavic folksong can be divided into two parts, the first treating the relation of man to nature, the second man's social relations. As in the previous three sections, Dobšinský expands on Štúr's scheme by one section. Unfortunately, as in the previous sections, Dobšinský illustrates his argument with examples from the tales rather than deriving it from them. Now more than ever the driving element is his religious training: for example, he argues that the ancient Slavs were remarkably moral in their relations and says, “It could not have been otherwise with a nation that had risen to such a sublime spiritual conception of the godhead as we have just described in the previous subsection” [Dobšinský 1871: 82].(7) In so doing he adds another level of contradiction. If in the first section Dobšinský had insisted that the tales were *not* about human relations but about nature, and in the second section interprets them as if they are about gods, now he interprets them as if, after all, they *are* about human relations! Dobšinský follows Štúr in asserting that the basis of all social relations for the ancient Slavs was *family love* [Dobšinský 1871: 82, Štúr 1955: 90]. One may agree that family or clan relations formed the social basis for the ancient Slavs, but the term “family love” introduces Christian morals into a place where it does not belong. Štúr at least recognized the pantheism of the Slavs, but what about their paganism? The lack of a solid distinction between pagan society and Christian society is not new, however, to Štúr and Dobšinský. It was entirely characteristic of the Czechoslovak pre-Romantic idealization of Slavic antiquities, which projected its humanistic program into the ancient Slavic past and, in doing so, made judicious use of such sources as Herder, Karamzin and older historians. This legacy was difficult to overcome. Note that Erben attributes the observation that the Slavs recognized one heavenly godhead to the sixth-century Byzantine historian Procopius, who also noted the democratic character of their society. It is typical of that discourse not to question either Procopius's motivations for such observations or their factual

basis. The Christian-pagan divide was the subject of a novel, *Záře nad pohanstvem* (The Dawn over Paganism), by Josef Linda, one of the suspected authors of the Czech forged manuscripts, which became canonical sources for projections of Czech antiquities. The theme of the novel is ostensibly the struggle between pagan and Christian Slavdom, embodied in the murder of Saint Václav by his brother Boleslav, but as Karel Krejčí has noted, the two sides do not really represent opposites: “A pagan figure from the forged manuscripts or from Linda’s novel and a Christian of the type of Bolzano (Bernard, a contemporary philosopher who taught religion at Prague’s university – D. C.) were people of the same worldview who simply in different ways invoked the same Rousseauesque God and loved their democratic Czech nation, animated by the noble ideal of humanity” [Krejčí 1949: 179].(8) Dobšinský’s very Christian version of Slavic antiquity, then, is entirely in line with this tradition.

The bulk of Dobšinský’s book may then be interesting from a cultural-historical perspective, but fails to offer a good reading of the tales themselves. Fortunately, in the last section of his book on “Starobylost’ a zachovalost’ pověstí” (The Antiquity and Well-Preserved Nature of the Tales), Dobšinský finally turns to a description of the poetics of the wondertale, and although here, too, he is developing the work of one of his teachers, Reuss, his method is at last to focus on a description of the character of the actual tales. His description of the formulaic language, abstract setting and expressive language of the tales, as well as their narration of the fantastic without doubt or wonder reveals his deep familiarity with the oral tale tradition and its expressive means.

The question still remains as to whether Dobšinský introduced any Christian elements into his published tales, just as he did into his analysis of them. This may be a false question in so far as the folk tradition from which the tales were collected had certainly experienced the influence of popular publications from the period of the Catholic Baroque. There is, therefore, no reason to assume that Christian morality was foreign to the living folk tradition, as Dobšinský knew it. Still, modern research on the international tale tradition emphasizes the stringing together of various motifs and structural units in forming folktales and notes that the question of the moral motivation of the plot is secondary, if not irrelevant to how the tales work [Propp 1968, Lüthi 1982].

In this respect we may consider the tale “Radúz and Ľudmíla” (AT 313 C [+ 327]), which Dobšinský prepared for his first collection of tales. Radúz is sent out from home to find work, and comes to a house inhabited by a witch, a warlock, and the beautiful Ľudmíla where he is taken in. On each of the next three days, the witch assigns Radúz an impossible task, which he is to complete by the next day, and with the help of Ľudmíla, who steals the witch’s magic wand, he completes the tasks. The witch becomes suspicious, though, and plans to cook Radúz in the morning. Ľudmíla learns of the plans and promises to help Radúz escape if he will promise never to forget her. He does and they escape. They are followed and three times, by changing their shapes, escape detection by the warlock and the witch. But in their final escape, the witch curses them so that they shall live apart seven years and Radúz shall forget Ľudmíla the first time he is kissed. Radúz and Ľudmíla come to his town to find it in mourning. All of his family has died except his mother, the queen. Radúz decides to enter alone and stake his claim to the throne and then to come back for Ľudmíla. He avoids a welcome kiss by his mother at first, but when he lies sleeping, she kisses him and he promptly forgets Ľudmíla. He marries

another, and Ľudmíla is left waiting for the seven years to pass. Finally she is revealed to him, he remembers her, sends his wife away and marries Ľudmíla.

This is what Dobšinský has to say about marriage in the section of his book on human relations: “Delirious, raving, eccentric or any other immorally directed lovemaking is alien to our tales, and the desires of men and women are always the desires of *pure love, directed towards the marriage bond*. . . . The tales do not admit such things, or when they do for a time, they always later *dissolve every marriage bond not founded on the mutual love of the conjoined* or which was the result of force or stemmed from selfish or any kind of impure intentions” [Dobšinský 1871: 83-4, emphasis added].(9) Dobšinský does not specifically mention Radúz and Ľudmíla in this section on marriage, but it was one of the tales that he had prepared himself for the first collection (apart from Dobšinský himself and Škultétý, many others were involved in preparing tales for the first collection). The motivation for Radúz dissolving his first marriage so quickly might be that it had been forced upon him in some sense by an impure outside cause, the witch’s curse. However, the motif of the forgotten bride is not given this motivation in the primary manuscript source used by Dobšinský in compiling this tale [Polívka 1925: 2:264].

Like other tale publishers of his generation, Dobšinský, when preparing tales for publication would gather together a number of variants of the given tale and pick one he considered the “best preserved” to use as the basis for his version. He would then add language and motifs from other variants in order to produce the fullest possible version. The manuscript variant on which Dobšinský based his version of Radúz and Ľudmíla does not include a curse put on the heroes by the witch. Radúz simply forgets her once he returns home. However, another manuscript variant does have the curse, and Dobšinský evidently added this available motivation to account for the motif of forgetting [Polívka 1925: 2:261-68]. Dobšinský’s goal was always a fully preserved version of a story, which allowed him to add motifs and motivations for motifs from other variants if he felt this would make the story more complete.(10) His goal does not seem to be to keep the tales in line with some preconceived version of their morality. He does not add motivations that are absent in the manuscript recordings and that therefore did not belong to the folk tradition. At times his addition of material, as in this case, contributes to a reading that is in line with his Christian viewpoint on the tales, but his additions are always justified as coming from the folk tradition, if not very directly.

At some level, Dobšinský recognized that the folktales did not entirely match his idealized description. At one point he expresses some embarrassment at the nature of some of the humorous tales he published, although he emphasizes the necessity of preserving such tales. He notes that the tales are symbolic in nature and require interpretation, so that the surface conflict with a given morality gives way to something entirely different at a deeper level [Dobšinský 1871: 153, 80-81]. In other words, when human relations conflict with morality, Dobšinský returns to a mythological interpretation. His multiple perspectives and approaches to interpretation of the tales allow him to find what he wants and needs for his different purposes, without, evidently, worrying about the inherent contradictions in them. It was left to later folklorists to provide an integrated approach, which did not attempt to force a Christian interpretation onto the Slovak wondertale.

NOTES

1 The first collection of Slovak tales was published by Ján Francisi, under the pseudonym Janko Rimavský, in 1845 and was entitled Slovenskije povesti (Slovak tales — note the unorthodox orthography: the collection was published prior to Štúr's codification of Slovak). Francisi had also been a student of the Lutheran lyceum.

2 The “Czech forged manuscripts” refers to those manuscripts whose “discovery” was carefully staged by Václav Hanka, Josef Linda, and possibly others in 1816, late 1817, and late 1818: the *Píseň pod Vyšehradem* (Song under Vyšehrad), the *Rukopis královédvorský* (Královédvorský manuscript) and *Rukopis zelenohorský* (Zelená hora manuscript). These represented fragments of would-be ancient Czech lyric and epic poetry that projected an idealized picture of the oldest Czech society. “Czechoslav” was a term of national self-designation that enjoyed a brief prominence among patriotic Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks during the period, giving way somewhat later to “Czechoslovak.”

3 *Vystúpil som v týchto úvahách na pole, kam uchvátily povesti ducha môjho samy od seba a samy sebou. ... Ale podme už odklínať v sebe zjavné tajnosti našich povestí, a preto odklínať jich len z nich samých, temer bez všetkých druhých výpomociek a doplnkov, trebárs by sme také aj na pomoc brat' mohli.*

4 *Keby sa boli k nám všetky verne dostali, znali by sme našich najdávnějších predkov bohovedu a svetotvorstvo.*

5 *Boly to blahé časy nášho detinstva, kde mysleli sme ako deti, a obrazotvornosť maľobná prevládala nad suchým rozumom.*

6 *Názor tento je panteizmus, ktorý v národných povestiach slovanských má ešte panstvo neobmedzené.*

7 *Ináč ani byť nemohlo u národa, ktorý povzniesol sa ku tak vznešenému duchovnému ponímaniu Božestva, jak sme to práve v predošlom pododdieli vysvetlili.*

8 *Pohan z Rukopisů nebo z Lindovy Záře a bolzanovský křesťan byli lidmi téhož světového názoru, kteří jen různým způsobem vzývali téhož rousseauovského Boha a milovali svůj demokratický, ušlechtilou ideou humanitní prodchnutý český národ.*

9 *Povesti naše jako neznajú blúznivého, rojčivého, výstredného lebo jakokoľvek k nemravu smerujúceho milkovania sa a túhy rodu muža i ženy, jedine a vždy tej túhy a lasky čistej k manželskému spojeniu smerujúcej. . . Povesti nedopúšťajú alebo kde dopúšťajú na čas, tam nasledovne zatracujú každé manželské spojenie, ktoréby nezakladalo sa na vzájomnej láske spojených, a tak už i vynútené bolo či by zo sebeckých lebo akýchkoľvek nečistých úmyslov pochádzalo.*

10 We should note here that, while in its ideal form the European folktale perhaps has no need for the motivation of motifs, in the living folk tradition the motivation of plot elements was not uncommon.

Dobšinský's editorial practices tend to maximize the motivation of the tales. When read against the Russian tales of Afanas'ev, the Slovak tales feel more logical, connected, and coherent; or, alternatively, more sedate, less whimsical, with less of an overt fantastic element.

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