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Experiencing Divinity. János Arany's Interpretation of Dante in 32 Lines*

László Gyapay
University of Miskolc (<gyapay.laszlo@btk.mta.hu>)

Abstract

In 1852 János Arany articulated his experience of Dante in an ode written to him ("Dante"). Based on the lines of *Inferno*, I, 79-80 ("Art thou that Virgil, then, that fountain-head / which poureth forth so broad a stream of speech?"), Dante's oeuvre is presented as deep and vast waters. The Biblical language building up the complex image of the waters makes it possible to associate the scene of the ode with that of the account of Creation in the Bible ("the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters", Genesis 1: 2). This parallelism suggests that Dante's poetry is comparable to that of the Creation of God. In the poem, the concept of the sublime serves as the common ground for both. I shall analyze the speaker's view on the relationship among Dante's poetry, divinity and the sublime.

Keywords: *Biblical Language, Dante in Hungary, János Arany, Panegyric, Sublimity*

"This magnificent epic poem [Dante's *Divine Comedy*], which has been published sixty times since 1472, and on which innumerable commentaries have been compiled, comprehends, in a way, the whole of the universe and just like that it is infinite and inexhaustible" – says an anonymous article in a general encyclopaedia published in Hungary in the early 1830s[1]. The editor of this 12 volume encyclopaedia was Gábor Döbrentei (1785-1851), who was the first to make an attempt at translating the *Divine Comedy* into Hungarian.

* I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Bernard Adams for his priceless advice on my English style.

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are mine. "Ezen nagy költemény, melly 1472 olta 60-szor adatott ki, 's számtalan commentatorokra talált, neminemüképen magában foglalja a' világ mindenségét, 's valamint ez, végtelen 's kimerithetetlen" (Wigand 1832, 522). Cf. Kaposi 1911, 95-103; Szauder 1966, 503-508.

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His fragments in prose from 1806 seem to be of little aesthetic value, but they indicate a waking interest in Dante. His admiration for the poetic qualities of the oeuvre of the Italian writer is well expressed by the rhetorical question from 1817: "Who will translate the *Divine Comedy* of this great, creative genius from Italian into our language?"[2] Dante was particularly praised for his approach to ancient Greek and Roman literature. In 1818 József Teleki (1790-1855), an erudite aristocrat, who later became the president of the Hungarian Academy, wrote in an essay comparing ancient and modern poetry: "With Christianity established on its firm corner-stone, the reading of the ancient pagan authors, which had previously been forbidden, was allowed, and in Italy, the cradle of orthodoxy, this gave birth to Dante, the courageous Dante, the one who was the first to respect the old"[3]. The dichotomy of ancient and modern is based mainly on Schiller's concept of naïve and sentimental. Another point that seemed to be of special significance was Dante's vernacularism. In 1824 Ferenc Kölcsey (1790-1838), a distinguished poet-critic, pointed out in a treatise on the Reformation that in the courts of Rome, Florence and Ferrara poets

> presented their peoples with works written in a language known to them earlier than German reformers did. And, what works! Dante and Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso were the leaders of a dawn that let no darkness be expected at its noon. What did not Petrarch and others do for Roman and Greek literature?[4]

As these and many other sporadic remarks from the first half of the nineteenth century show, Dante was involved and highly honoured in Hungarian critical discourse. He was presented as a kind of legitimization for the Romantic Movement, but no systematic analysis or detailed description of his poetry was produced. The first autonomous piece of writing devoted totally to Dante was a 32 line poem by János Arany in 1852.

János Arany (1817-1882) was a poet, critic and translator, and he is now, beyond all doubt, regarded as one of the most prominent Hungarian writers. He was a Calvinist man of humble origin, an avid reader of all sorts of literature and an eminent student, though he did not finish his formal

[2] "Ki fogja ezen hatalmas teremtő észláng divina Comediáját olaszból nyelvünkre fordítani?" (Döbrentei 1817, 91).

[3] "Azomban a' Keresztyén vallás tántoríthatatlan alapkövein megállapíttatván, a' régi pogány írók olvasása, mely eddig tilalmaztatott, megengedtetett, és így támadott Olasz Országban, az Orthodoxia böltsőjében, Dante, a' merész Dante, a' régiek legelső betsűlője" (Teleki 1818, 68).

[4] "Minden ismeri, csak említenem kell, azon olasz poetákat s művészeket, kik a pápáknál, s a ferrarai és florenci udvaroknál oltalmat, segédet s hospitalitást találtak, és akik elébb adtak a népnek ismeretes nyelven készűlt munkákat, mint a német reformátorok, és minő munkákat! Dante és Petrarca, Ariost és Tasso egy oly hajnalnak vezetői voltanak, mely nem setétséget hagyott nappalán reméleni. Mit nem tett a deák és görög literaturáért Petrarca és mások?" (Kölcsey 1960, 1063-1064).

education. He had to support himself and his family from an early age so he took both teaching and administrative jobs. As an established poet, in the 1860s he edited two important weekly critical magazines and later was elected secretary of the Hungarian Academy. This open minded, talented man was a real autodidact, who quickly became a true *poeta doctus*. He learnt foreign languages mainly by systematically studying and sometimes translating the Greek, Latin, English, French, German and Italian classics. Among others, he brilliantly translated *Hamlet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King John* and all the comedies of Aristophanes. The different features of these pieces reveal an essential characteristic of him: he was an ardent experimentalist, always trying his hand at new genres, tones, colours, tunes etc. His art is not at all of an imitative nature, but his extensive reading in Hungarian and world literature provided him with a great variety of models. Dante, no doubt, was one of them. As a critic, he used him as a point of reference to show quality and expertise. When blaming a male writer for indecency in 1861, he wrote: "When Juvenal, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe include moral ugliness in their descriptions to make the work complete the case is hugely different from that of the writer who collects clubby stories and jokes just because he and – as he thinks – many other 'male' readers like them"[5]. In the same year Arany talked about the lack of virtuosity in contemporary Hungarian versification, saying: "I can name no Hungarian versifier, whose skill, exclusively from a technical point of view, not taking the inside into consideration, could be compared to Virgil, Dante, Tasso or – to mention a more recent one – to Béranger"[6].

Arany started to learn Italian in 1838, at the age of 21, but he first read Dante in the German translation of Karl Steckfuss. His *marginalia* are still to be seen in a copy of the 1840 edition. In 1852, in a letter to a friend, he quoted the opening line of the *Inferno* in Italian and the inscription on the entrance to hell in German. It was not later than 1856 when he reported that he was reading the *Comedy* in the original language. In the same year, he published an essay on Hungarian versification in which he used his translation of the first six lines to illustrate how the rhyme scheme (aba, bcb, cdc etc.) connects the tercets of the *Comedy* (Arany 1962c, 253). All these signs show that Dante made a strong and prolonged impact on Arany, the culmination of which was certainly in 1852 (Arany 1951, 456-457). At that time he wrote a dozen tercets of a planned mock-comedy with the title of "The Small Infer-

[5] "Egészen más, ha egy Juvenál, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe olykor műve teljességét azzal eszközli, hogy az erkölcsi rútat is bevonta festése körébe, más pedig, ha valaki csak azért szed össze sikamlós anekdotákat s élceket, mert az neki – s gondolja, sok 'férfi' olvasójának tetszik" (Arany 1963, 36).

[6] "Azonban én, magyar versírók között, ily virtuózt nem ismerek; nem általában olyat, ki egy Virgilnek, Danténak, Tassonak – vagy hogy újabb költőt említsek, Bérangernek – a bensőt nem számítva – csak technicai ügyességét fölérné is" (Arany 1968b, 191).

no"[7]. According to its draft "il mezzo camino di nostra vita [Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita]"[8] the poet finds himself in the middle of a fair. As he cannot stand the hustle and bustle of the crowd, he tries to escape to the top of the hill in the middle of the market but monsters stop him. Later, being mistaken for a thief, he is chased and flees into a dirty tavern where, in the fat barman, he recognizes Horace, who offers to show him the way out of the fair through the small inferno. In the fragment, it turns out that the hill is Parnassus and the first monster is frivolity (corresponding to the leopard: *Inferno* I, 32). Arany's rich experimental vein is well demonstrated by the fact that he was prepared to exploit the inspiration of the *Divine Comedy* in two totally different ways. I say so because "Dante", the poem written in the same year, is absolutely of a different type.

Occasional poetry, to which genre ode originally belonged, was widely cultivated in Hungary in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The young literary elite of the time and the romantic generation fiercely condemned occasional poetry. It was thought not to be composed by inspiration but to be routinely written to fill the time or space of something which was mainly not of artistic but of social or political interest. The patron to whom the poem was dedicated had to be praised and his deeds enumerated in order to justify the place he was assigned to in the national or local pantheon. There existed a kind of craftsmanship, which on the one hand, as technical skill, was highly appreciated while on the other hand its true poetic value was denied. Things like allusions to Horace or Ovid (whom the audience knew well), fluent versification, rhymes of several syllables like "peace talks" and "pea stalks" belong to that category. Arany himself shared many of these views (Arany 1968a, 158-159). Thus writing an ode to Dante meant to him that the conventions of panegyric of the recent past had to be modified a great deal. And that he certainly did, as his poem very well shows.

"Dante"	"Dante"
Állottam vizének mélységei felett,	By his waters deep, I stood there contemplating.
Sima volt a fölszín, de sötét, mint árnyék;	Flat the surface lay, and full of shadows grave;
Alig mozzantá meg a rózsalevelet,	And atop it, petals, gently undulating,
Mint rengéskor a föld, csak alig hullámlék.	Like a hardly-noticed earthquake's subtle wave.
Acéltiszta tükre visszaverte híven	Clear as steel, its mirror faithfully reflected
A külső világot – engem is: az embert;	What it found outside – and me: the human world;

[7] "A kis Pokol" (Arany 1952, 31-32). Cf. *ibidem*, 223-224.
[8] Cf. Emiliani-Giudici 2013, 200.

De örvényeibe nem hatott le a szem,
Melyeket csupán ő – talán ő sem – ismert.

Csodálatos szellem! egy a mérhetetlen
Éggel, amely benne tükrödzik alattam!
Egy csak a fönségben és a terjedetben
És mivel mindenik oly megfoghatatlan.
Az ember … a költő (mily bitang ez a név!)
Hitvány koszorúját, reszketvén, elejti
És, mintha lábait szentegyházba tenné,
Imádva borul le, mert az Istent sejti. –

E mélység fölött az értelem mér-ónja,
Mint könnyű pehelyszál, fönnakad, föllebben:
De a lélek érzi, hogy az örvény vonja,
S a gondolat elvész csodás sejtelemben.
Nem-ismert világnak érezi nyomását,
Rettegő örömnek elragadja kéje,
A leviathánnak hallja hánykodását…
Az Úr lelke terült a víznek föléje.

Lehet-é e szellem az istenség része?
Hiszen az istenség egy és oszthatatlan;
Avagy lehet-é, hogy halandó szem nézze
A szellemvilágot, teljes öntudatban?
Évezred hanyatlik, évezred kel újra,
Míg egy földi álom e világba téved,
Hogy a hitlen ember imádni tanulja
A köd oszlopában rejlő Istenséget.
(Arany 1951, 160-161)

He alone – perhaps not even he – detected
Turbulence with which, deep down, the water swirled.

Marvellous, his spirit! One with the unending
Heaven that's reflected here before my eyes!
Just as far beyond all grasping, comprehending,
Equal in its grandeur, equal in its size!
And the man … the poet (wretched rascal's label!)
Trembling, drops his worthless laurels to the sod;
And, as if before a church's altar table,
Prayerful, he kneels earthward, for he senses God. –

Such a depth makes reason's plumbline grow unsteady,
Float as if with feather weighted, not with lead.
Consciousness accepts it's caught up in the eddy.
Wondrous divination fills the human head.
It can feel the pull of other-worldly quarters;
Shudders at the dread and pleasures they afford;
Hears Leviathan go thrashing in the waters…
Onto which has passed the presence of the Lord.

Is it part of the one Godhead, then, this spirit?
After all, the Godhead's one unbroken whole.
And the spirit world, could mortal see or hear it,
When his conscious mind is fully in control?
One millennium sets and one millennium rises,
Till a mortal's dream into that world will stray,
Till the unbelieving person recognizes
That mist-hidden Godhead to which he must pray.
(Trans. by David Hill, in Prickett 2010, 711)

Simply stated, instead of a laudatory, more or less extrinsic description of who Dante was and what he did, we are presented with a visual image of a vast sea and some meditations triggered by its impression on the speaking "I" of the poem. If the title did not tell us to whom this ode was written it would be hard, if not impossible, to associate Dante with the text. As an alternative to recalling the events of Dante's life and his achievements, Arany's poem presents his greatness by a contemplative soliloquy that testifies to the fact that the *Divine Comedy* (or Dante's oeuvre) had the power to provide man with experience of God.

In the first stanza of the poem we have an elaborate poetic image: vast, deep, flat waters with mirror-like reflections on the surface[9]. Later in the text,

[9] Cf. Eisemann 2001, 4-5; Eisemann 2007, 605-606; Eisemann 2010, 265-267.

this sea turns out to be identified as the metaphor for Dante's oeuvre. The motif of presenting poetry as water finds a parallel in the two lines of the *Inferno*, where Dante, talking to Virgil, refers to his works as a wide river: "Art thou that Virgil, then, that fountain-head / which poureth forth so broad a stream of speech?!"[10] (*Inferno*, I, 79-80). In Arany's poem, the tenor of the metaphor is not explicitly expressed and the clue to the understanding of what the waters stand for is delayed until lines 9-10 ("Marvellous, his spirit! One with the unending / Heaven that's reflected here before my eyes!"). Though the possessive pronoun in the first line ("By *his* waters deep" [emphasis added]) may suggest this reading, the long and detailed description of the sea does not provide confirmation, and consequently the visualization of the landscape of the opening lines is left open to different associations. The vastness and emptiness of the scene with grave shadows on the surface of the waters and the imitation of Biblical language recall the Biblical account of creation: "and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1: 2)[11]. This interpretation seems to be justified by the fact that the opening picture is further elaborated in line 23 and 24 where the destruction of the Leviathan is alluded to: "Hears Leviathan go thrashing in the waters, / Onto which has passed the *presence of the Lord*" (Cf. "Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, *and* gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness" [Psalm 74: 14]; "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" [Genesis 1: 2]).

The visual image of the primeval waters suggests a dim and distant past together with immensity of dimension and greatness in volume. As the surface of the deep waters reflects the outside world, including man and obviously the sky, not only is the vertical dimension emphasized over the horizontal[12] but also an image of wholeness is produced, which incorporates the idea of transcendence. Besides, strength is an integral component of the poetic image: the simile of earthquake adds the notion of force to the picture (line 4). Though the text does not establish causal relation between the earthquake and the gently undulating petals (line 3), the two phenomena are still associated in the reader's mind. Consequently, the poetic effect of the simile results in highlighting the hugeness of the amount of the water and its enormous inertia since the tranquillity of the scene is not disturbed even by the force of an earthquake. At the same time the calmness of the surface is contrasted with

[10] Trans. by Courtney Langdon in Langdon 1918-1921, 9; "Or se' tu quel Virgilio, e quella fonte, / Che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?" (Emiliani-Giudici 2013, 203).

[11] *The Bible* is quoted from: *The Study Bible: Authorized King James Version* (1993). Gáspár Károli's Hungarian translation of the *Bible* was extensively used by Hungarian protestant readers. The *King James Bible* may rightly be regarded as its English equivalent. This is why it is used in this paper. In the *King James Bible*, the words set in italics are the ones that were added by the translators to help the reader.

[12] Cf. Blair 1787, 59-60; Kardos 1968, 60.

turbulences in the depth, generating a mysterious, slightly disharmonious and disquieting overall picture of the universe, which might appear unfathomable even to Dante himself (lines 7-8).

In order to understand how this poetic image contributes to the spiritual process of experiencing God, we must turn our attention to Arany's aesthetic theory. In the 1850s, as a teacher of literature, he compiled for his students two slightly different versions of a concise introduction to aesthetics ("Preliminary Aesthetic Attainments"[13] and "Notes on Aesthetics"[14]). The exact date of their compilation is not known but it seems most likely that "Notes on Aesthetics" is the later of the two (see Arany 1962a, 634).

For the purpose of our analysis, the starting point of Arany's argument is the assumption that the "main goal of *art* is *beauty*"[15]. As contrasted with natural beauty, artistic beauty falls into three categories: the charming, the sublime and the ridiculous (Arany 1962b, 536). He discusses each at length, but the key issue in our line of reasoning is the sublime. In the first step, he draws a distinction between the charming and the sublime:

> The charming is clear, open, bright and joyous: *the sublime is obscure, mysterious, gloomy and sombre*. The former is weak, the latter is strong; the former is small, the latter is great; the former is feminine and childish, the latter is masculine beauty, which expresses power. There needs to be harmony, whereas *contrast* contributes to its effect here.[16]

Arany goes on by describing what sensory objects, be they natural or artistic, generate sublime feelings: "From an *objective* point of view, a sublime object is dominated by the idea, by the spirit over the form […]. Accordingly, in case of the sublime, harmony is not important, so much so, that in many cases it can do wrong to the sublime"[17]. After the general characterization of his subject, Arany goes into a more detailed categorization of sublime objects:

Térbeni fönség az, mely csupán rendkívüli nagysága által indít bennünket bámulatra. Az elláthatatlan puszta, a csillagos ég, stb. roppant kiterjedésük által hatnak ránk.	*Spatial sublimity* occurs when we are moved to admiration only by huge dimensions. A boundless desert, starry sky etc. impress us by their extraordinary physical extension.

[13] "Széptani előismeretek" (Arany 1962a, 635).

[14] "Széptani jegyzetek" (Arany 1962b, 532). About the sources Arany used see Pap 1934.

[15] "A *művészetek* fő célja a *szép*" (Arany 1962b, 534).

[16] "A kellem tiszta, nyílt, derűlt, vidor: *a fenséges zavaros, rejtélyes, borult komor.* Amaz gyönge, ez erős; amaz kicsiny, ez nagy; az női s gyermeki, ez férfias szépség, melly erőt fejez ki. Amott összhangzat kell: ennek hatását a *contraszt* még emeli" (Arany 1962a, 641).

[17] "*Tárgyilag* véve: a fönséges tárgyban az eszme, a szellemi uralkodik, mint egy az idom felett […]. Eszerint a fönségesnél az *összhang* nem lényeges dolog, sőt az idom összhangja sokszor ártana is a fenségesnek" (Arany 1962b, 538).

A térbeni fönség legnagyobb foka a *végtelen*.
Időbeni fönség az, mely az idő hosszúsága által hat meg. A régi hősöket fönségesbeknek képzeljük, mint a most élő embereket. Egy várrom, a Lybanon cédrusai stb. az idő által lesznek fönségessé. Az időbeni fenség legfőbb foka az *örök*.
A tér- s időbeni fönség *egyesülhet* is valamely tárgyban. Pl. az egyiptomi gulák nemcsak roppant nagyságuk, hanem egyszersmind régiségök által döbbentik meg a nézőt. […]
Az *erőbeni* fönség kétféle: anyagi és szellemi. *Anyagi* erőt mutat pl. egy tengeri vész; *szellemi* erőt az ellenség közé visszatérő Attilius Regulus, a méregivó Sokrates; a Róma szabadságát túlélni nem tudó Uticai Cato; egy Leonidas, egy Zrínyi stb.
Az erőbeni fenség is egyesülhet a térbenivel: a háborgó oceán térben, erőben is nagyszerű.
Isten fogalmában: *mindenütt jelenvaló, térbeni fönség*; öröktől fogva és örökké való: *időbeni fönség*; mindenható, mindentudó stb. *erőbeni fönség*. Tehát az isten a legfönségesb fogalom: mert benne minden fönség egyesülve van.
(Arany 1962b, 539)

The greatest degree of spatial sublimity is the *infinite*.
Temporal sublimity occurs when we are moved by the length of time. Ancient heroes are imagined to be superior to the people of our days. The ruins of a castle, the cedar of Lebanon etc. are sublime by time. The greatest degree of temporal sublimity is the *eternal*.
Spatial and temporal sublimity can *blend* in a single object. For example, the pyramids of Egypt shock the onlooker not only by their huge dimensions but also by their antiquity. […]
Power can be sublime in two ways: both physical and spiritual power can move us. A storm at sea, for instance, represents physical power, whereas Atilius Regulus, who returned to the hostile Carthage; Socrates, who drank poison; Cato the Younger, who could not survive the fall of Roman liberty; Leonidas and Zrínyi represent spiritual power.
Sublimity of power can also blend with the spatial sublime: the stormy ocean is magnificent both in space and power.
The concept of God includes *omnipresence*: *spatial sublimity*; foreverness and everlastingness: *temporal sublimity*; omnipotence, omniscience etc.: *sublimity of power*. Consequently, the concept of God represents the uppermost degree of the sublime: it unites all sorts of sublimity.

This theory on sublimity, which is likely to have been compiled around the time the poem was written, may provide the basis of an interpretation of the ode to Dante. The correlation Arany establishes between the concept of God and the uppermost degree of the sublime entitles us to draw the conclusion that, in the spirit of the theory, a complex poetic image of condensed sublimity meeting the demands of art will evoke the concept of God in the reader's mind. The opening picture of the poem seems to make use of this interrelation. It may fairly be argued that the components of the scene bear the traces of a selection in which the requirements of the sublime have been carefully considered. The unlimited scale of space with which we are presented suggests infinity. The fact that the onlooker, i.e. the speaker, has such an overall

view of the surface of the waters implies that his position is somewhere high above the surface (In the Hungarian text, the word "felett", meaning "above", is included in the emphatic end-position in the first line). When discussing the subcategories of the spatial sublime, as an example of the grand, Arany also mentions that "there is a majestic view from the Lomnic Peak"[18] (the most famous peak of the High Tatras in the north of former Hungary, now Lomnickýštít, Slovakia), which can be rightly considered as a device that again contributes to the sublimity of the description.

Given the reference to an early phase of the Creation, the temporal setting of the scene becomes an effective case of the sublime of time. There are further temporal elements that are to intensify the result. The speaker's first comment on the sea is about its mysterious character (lines 7-8). Within the frame of Arany's classification of sublimity, the mystic belongs to one of the subcategories of the temporal sublime since the unravelling of a mystery

A *titokszerű* (mysticum), melly az időbeli fenséghez tartozik, minthogy megfejtése a jövőnek hagyatott fen, vagy az örökletig fejtetlen marad. Az egyiptomi nép mythosza illy titkolódzás által lett fenségessé. Legtitkosabb lény az isten, azért is legfenségesb; mint a saisi fátyolozott kép, mellynek felirata ez volt: „én vagyok, a mi volt, van, s lesz; és az én fátyolomat egy halandó sem lebbentheti fel.
(Arany 1962a, 641)

Is to happen in the future or a mystery remains unsolved forever. The mythology of the Egyptian people grew sublime by such concealment. God is the most mysterious being consequently he is the most sublime; like the veiled image in Saïs, whose inscription read: "I am all that hath been, and is, and shall be; and my veil no mortal hath hitherto raised.

Again, we have a significant component that, according to the implicit argument of Arany's theory, has the capacity of calling to mind the notion of God.

The sublime of power plays no lesser role in the compositional structure of the poem. Besides the motif of the earthquake, the allusion to the act of creation is an integral contribution to intensifying the effect of the sublime as Arany argues that "*[d]ivine power*, which creates the world by the phrase 'let there be', is the most sublime"[19]. Later on in the poem (lines 23-24), the fight between the Leviathan and God is also alluded to, which results in a scene of concentrated sublimity dominated by the aspect of power. We have the unfathomable depth of the waters (aspect of space) with the frightening, primordial (aspect of time) aquatic monster (aspect of power) being beaten by God. The name of the Leviathan is mentioned six times in the Hebrew

[18] "A Lomnici csúcsról nagyszerű kilátás esik" (Arany 1962b, 539).
[19] "Legfenségesebb az *isteni erő,* melly 'legyen' szavával világot teremt" (Arany 1962a, 641).

Bible[20]. In all of these cases, it seems to embody superhuman or even godlike power. The following quote from God's description of the crocodile-like monster from *The Book of Job* clearly exemplifies this:

> Lay thine hand upon him [the Leviathan], remember the battle, do no more. Behold, the hope of him is in vain: shall not *one* be cast down even at the sight of him? None *is so* fierce that dare stir him up: who then is able to stand before me? […] He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: he maketh the sea like a pot of ointment. He maketh a path to shine after him; *one* would think the deep *to be* hoary. Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear. He beholdeth all high *things*: he *is* a king over all the children of pride. (Job 41: 8-10; 31-34)

Having this portrayal in mind, even a sheer allusion to the sea-monster suffices to evoke sublime feelings. What Arany theorizes in terms of the immane, the horrible and the terrible is in obvious relation to the Leviathan. He argues that these three aesthetic categories also

> a *szörnyű*, *borzasztó*, *rettenetes*, szinte a fönséges köréhez tartoznak s erőbeni fenséget tüntetnek elő. *Szörnyű* (immane) az, ami inkább nagysága s szokatlan alakja, mint a benne rejlő veszély által ijeszt, pl. az egyszemű cyclopsok, kigyólábú gygasok. *Borzasztó* (horridum), ha benne veszélyes erő nyilatkozik, mint a tengeri vihar, a romboló árvíz. *Rettenetes* (terribile), ha a veszély hirtelensége által meglep, mint a lesújtó villám. (Arany 1962b, 540)

belong to the sphere of the sublime and occasion sublimity of power. *The immune* (immane) is what frightens us by its size and unusual form rather than by the danger it represents; for example one eyed Cyclopes, snake-footed Gigantes. *The horrible* (horridum) is brought about when threatening powers like storms at sea and destructive floods manifest themselves. *The terrible* (terribile) is brought about when the astonishment is caused by the suddenness of the danger like in the case of a lightning stroke.

In addition to all these, there are even more sources of sublimity, identifiable with the help of Arany's aesthetics. When calling attention to some of the instances of the sublime in ancient classical literature, he points out that "in Homer, in the disguise of kind simplicity, many examples of the highest degree of sublimity are to be found. […] Such is the case when Zeus shakes the whole of the universe by shaking his *ambrosial locks of hair*"[21]. Arany refers to the famous scene in the *Iliad* when Zeus nods his head to show consent

[20] Job 3: 8; Job 40: 25-41: 26; Psalm 74: 14; Psalm 104: 26; Isaiah 27: 1 (twice). Cf. Korpel, De Moor 2017, 3-18.

[21] "Homérnál, kedves egyszerűség leplébe burkolva igen sok példáit találjuk a legnagyobb fokú fenségnek. […] Illyen az, hogy Zeüsz megrázván *ambroziás hajfürtjeit,* ez által az egész világ alkotmánya megrendül" (Arany 1962a, 643).

to the request of Thetis: "Zeus, son of Cronos, nodded his dark brows. / The divine hair of the king of gods fell forward, / down over his immortal head, shaking Olympus / to its very base"[22] (Homer, *Iliad I*, 528-530). Then he goes on to argue that "Ovid imitates the scene in a much less effective way as he attributes more effort to Jupiter: 'shook thrice and again his awful locks, wherewith he moved the land and sea and sky'"[23]. The underlying premise of his evaluation can be summed up in the formula that the less the effort needed to elicit grand consequences, the more sublime the scene will appear. This applies perfectly to the way how the deadly fight between the Leviathan and God is represented. Two Biblical loci provide the basis for the smashing of the Leviathan: "IN THAT day the LORD with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea" (Isaiah 27, 1), and Psalm 74, 14, which has been quoted above. In contrast to the Biblical version of the slaughter, where forceful physical activity and violent movements of confronting beings are implied, no combative action by God is depicted in Arany's poem. There are two consecutive events described: the perception of the sound the writhing Leviathan makes in the water and the advent of the spirit of God. The act of defeating the dragon is not visualized but rather conceptualized. Though there is no causal relation verbalised between the writhing of the monster and the triumphant God, the allusion to the Biblical fight encourages the interpretation that it was God who made the Leviathan "go *thrashing* in the waters" (line 23, emphasis added). In this way, Arany presents a crucial fight in which victory is won by the sheer presence of God. Compared to the highly praised lines of Homer, he gives us a conception of a vital clash with *no* perceptible effort exercised by God. Special emphasis is given to the victory by the fact that it is presented as part of the Creation, since line 24 explicitly refers to Genesis 1: 2, as shown above (Kardos 1968, 67). Consequently, God's triumph appears to be an event which defines the quality of the Creation. Beyond doubt, the greatness of all the key elements of the scene makes it an indispensable contribution to the sublime character of the poem.

Having taken a brief look at some aspects of the sublime character of the poem, it is now time to consider how the speaker contributes to inducing the stimuli that evoke God's presence. The basis of our approach is that Arany's

[22] Trans. by Ian Johnston in Homer 2006, 25; "ἦ καὶ κυανέῃσιν ἐπ᾽ὀφρύσι νεῦσε Κρονίων· / ἀμβρόσιαι δ᾽ ἄρα χαῖται ἐπερρώσαντο ἄνακτος / κρατὸς ἀπ᾽ ἀθανάτοιο· μέγαν δ᾽ ἐλέλιξεν Ὄλυμπον" (Csengery 1908, 18).

[23] "Mit Ovidius már sokkal gyengébben utánoz, nagyobb erőködést tulajdonitván Jupiternek: *Terribilem* capitis *concussit terque quaterque* Cesariem; cum qua terras, mare, sidera movit" (Arany, 1962a, 643). The quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (I, 179-180) is the prose translation of Frank Justus Miller in Miller 1951, 14-15.

description of the effect the sublime exercises on the recipients seems to be in strict correspondence with the psychological dynamics of the speaker. Arany states that from "a *subjective* point of view, a sublime object first moves and astonishes us by letting us feel *our own smallness*, but soon this unpleasant feeling turns into joy"[24]. This psychological pattern is undoubtedly detectable in the way in which the speaker reflects on the image of the waters representing the *Divine Comedy* and what the emotions and thoughts are that arise from his reflections. The speaker's first-person-singular soliloquy starts with an account of a past event in which he observed the waters of an intensely sublime character and in which the focus is on the description of the scene rather than on the circumstances of the occasion (lines 1-6). It has to be noted that my reasoning is based on the contention that the speaker is aware of the fact that the sight he remembers stands for Dante's *magnum opus*. Since he is not addressing his words to a definite audience, unsurprisingly, he does not feel obliged to make his argumentation easily comprehensible, rationally articulated and logically lucid from the beginning. It is not his actual speaking position that entails the poem to be coherent but the poetic needs of the composition requires its sentences to turn out to be a consistently articulated whole *by the end*. The implicit fictitious framework of the poem is that we obtain an insight into the solitary recollections and meditations of someone whose references are not crystal clear *from the start*. That is why the reader is left uncertain whether the opening lines with the description should be understood literally or figuratively. From the reader's point of view, the next two lines (7-8) contain an uncertain allusion to Dante: the turbulences of the swirling water in the unfathomable depth under the tranquil surface may evoke inferno and, in the light of the title, the emphatically doubled pronouns [he] may refer to Dante. Even so, at this point, a definite interpretation of the opening scene is hardly possible. Besides, these lines barely confirm the suspicion that the waters should be taken metaphorically. At the same time, as far as the speaker is concerned, there is a delicate shift of his attention from the details of the primordial ocean to his own reflections on it. This shift can be psychologically justified by the regular experience that, subsequent to a period of concentrated observation, the mind is likely to establish its relationship to the object observed. In doing so, the speaker unconsciously compares his comprehension of the world to that of Dante and, from this point on, his focus fixes on the supreme poet.

In the first half of the second stanza (lines 9-12), the speaker heuristically articulates his realization of the character of Dante's spirit, who is endowed with different features of the sublime. The abstract pattern of the sublimity

[24] "*Alanyilag* véve: A fönséges tárgy az, mely először meghat, megdöbbent, mintegy érezteti velünk *önkicsinységünket:* de aztán csakhamar a kellemetlen érzésből gyönyör fejlik ki" (Arany 1962b, 538).

of the recalled experience of the waters seems to have been mapped into the observing mind, because this pattern appears to be involuntarily reproduced in the reflections of the speaker. Line 9 starts with his exclamation "Marvellous, his spirit!". The marvellous, as an aesthetic category, is included in Arany's theory:

A csodás (mirabile). Csodásnak nevezzük azt, ami mintegy természetfeletti erő által látszik végbevitetni, mely titkosan működik. És így rokon a titokszerűvel; de azon felül valami rejtett erő működését sejtjük. Eszerint az időbeni s egyszersmind erőbeni fenségeshez tartozik. (Arany 1962b, 540)

The marvellous (mirabile). We call something "marvellous" when, so to say, it seems to be carried out by supernatural power, which works secretly. Therefore, it is akin to the mystic; but, additionally, we conjecture the workings of some hidden power. Thus, it belongs to both the sublime of time and power.

The spatial aspect is immediately added to the characterization by identifying the spirit of Dante with "the unending / Heaven" (lines 9-10). Accordingly, all the three major categories of the sublime are contained in the two lines. Sublime associations and relating the spirit of Dante to heaven represent a kind of unconscious deifying attitude. As the speaker goes on speculating, in lines 11 and 12, all this is confirmed in a slightly more abstract hence slightly more conscious way. His flow of thoughts is focused on the God-like character of the object of his experience (Dante's spirit) by highlighting its equality with heaven in different aspects: incomprehensibility, sublimity and size. (In the Hungarian text, the equivalent of the word "grandeur" is "fönség", which means "sublimity").

In order to understand the inner logic, or rather the psychological dynamics of the speaker, it is important to note that under the influence of God-like sublimity elicited by recalling the qualities of the *Divine Comedy*, he instinctively compares Dante to men in general and poets in particular (lines 13-16). The contrast (a component of the sublime) he perceives generates a feeling of inferiority in him. The psychological development is visualized by the trembling body and the falling of a laurel wreath of honour to the ground. At the same time, there is a bitter recognition concerning the meaning of the noun "poet": "wretched rascal's label!" (line 13). The word "poet" ultimately comes from the ancient Greek noun *ποιητής* meaning "maker", "inventor", "lawgiver", "composer of verse and music"; and from the verb *ποιέω* meaning "make", "create", "compose" (Liddell, Scott 1883). In the Hungarian text, there is the slightly archaic noun and adjective *bitang* (translated into: "wretched rascal") to express the unreliability of the meaning of the noun "poet". In a dictionary published in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first meaning of the word is given as: "prey, booty, i.e. property obtained by force, by tournament, in fight, snatched from its previous possessor". In addition, it means "stray animal" hence also "tramp"

and "illegitimate child"[25]. In all these cases, the common motif is "being out of place" both literally and figuratively. At this point, it is worth remembering that nowhere in the poem is there one single explicit hint at any of Dante's specific poetic achievements. It is his unparalleled, complex sublimity and God-like quality that is juxtaposed against the poets, whose creative power, according to long-standing European traditions, is often considered to be similar to that of God (Mack 2005, 17-33). This contrast fulfils a double function: on the one hand, it confirms the grandeur of Dante again; on the other hand, it makes man feel his own inferiority, which is visualized as man kneeling as if in a sanctuary and adoring God (Horváth 1997, 211). Although the phrase "a church's altar table" (line 15) brings into the picture a component that might seem incongruent for the reason that it refers to a limited space, as contrasted with the vastness of the sea and the sky, it does not disturb the poetic consistency of the text because: firstly, it sets the focus on sacredness, which is the central idea of the ode; secondly, this phrase is part of a simile and thus has only restricted power to shift attention from the original scene; thirdly, it does not interfere with the contrast of the vastness of the universe and the smallness of man since the speaker does not change his position. His inward eyes are kept on sources of the sublime, which, after a while, results in experiencing the presence of God. This is the point when he goes through the first psychological phase of the impact sublimity imposes on him. In Arany's own words (as quoted above): the sublime "first moves and astonishes us letting us feel *our own smallness*". The next phase of the workings of sublimity on men, i.e. how "this unpleasant feeling turns into joy" (see footnote 24), is represented in the following eight lines (lines 17-24).

In line 17, the speaker's focus shifts back from the creator ("Marvellous, his spirit", line 9) to his creation, in other words, from Dante to his masterpiece. Poetically, this shift is accomplished by a return to and an elaboration of the motifs by which Arany metaphorically described the *Divine Comedy* in the first stanza. While in lines 7-8 ("He alone – perhaps not even he – detected / Turbulence with which, deep down, the water swirled") the human sensory organs are said to be unable to penetrate into the depth, in lines 17-18 ("Such a depth makes reason's plumbline grow unsteady, / Float as if with feather weighted, not with lead"), metaphorically, a very basic and reliable instrument, the plumb proves

[25] "1) A régi nyelvben a[nnyi] m.[int] zsákmány, préda, azaz, erőszakkal, bajvivással, harczban szerzett, eléb bi birtokosától elragadott jószág. *És a bitangot osztani akarnák.És a sok bitangból szentegyházat rakattata.* (Sz. László legendája). *Bitangra kitenni vagyonát. Leányágra szállott jószág egy a bitanggal.* K[öz]m[ondás]. 2) Urahagyott, uraveszett jószág, melyhez mindenki hozzányúl, Csáky szalmája. Különösen eltévelyedett barom, melynek ura nem tudatik, s melyet, kinek tetszik, elfog, behajt, használ, szóval, zsákmány gyanánt él vele. *Bitang ló, bitang marha. A tilosban járóbitang marhát behajtani a biróhoz.* Innen átv. értelemben mondják csavargó emberről, ki senkihez nem tartónk. *Bitang szolga* = uratlan kóborló. *Sehonnai bitang ember*" (Czuczor, Fogarasi 1862-1874, 670).

to be totally useless. As can be seen, the structural unity in the motion of narration is determined not by the formal logic of argumentation but by the laws of association. In this regard, the shift of attention is convincingly motivated from a psychological point of view not only because there is an evident relationship between the writer and his opus but also because it appears to be a natural reaction that, having been faced with the inexplicable, God-like character of the *spirit* of Dante, the speaker tries to comprehend his *epic* in a rational way. The failure of this approach is visualized by an image, which fits perfectly into the system of the relatively few motifs that the poem utilises. In spite of rational incomprehensibility, no insuperable antagonism arises between the speaker's mind and the object of its sensation as, in a non-rational way, the *perceptive power* of the soul grasps the world created by Dante. (A literally accurate translation of line 19 reads in English: "the soul *feels* being caught up in the eddy" [emphasis added]). At this point, when the speaker is still completely overwhelmed by the sublimity experienced, astonishment begins to turn into joy. Instead of being driven (mainly) by intellect, the soul starts to be oriented by divination (line 20), which, under the influence Dante's sublime poetry, results in "dread and pleasures" (line 22). Dread is evidently inflicted by the proximity to ultimate power. The Biblical scene of Moses and the Burning Bush can be referred to as an example of it (Otto 1936, 12-24): "Moreover he said, I *am* the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exodus 3: 6). The sources of pleasures are not less carefully motivated from a psychological point of view. In lines 23-24, the speaker feels to be witnessing the victory of God over the primal monster of the waters; at the same time, the phraseology, recalling the well known last part of the second verse of Genesis ("And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"), makes this triumph part of the Creation, consequently the act of creation becomes interwoven with the idea of being delivered from evil. A narrative like that can convincingly motivate great joy. In a strict sense, we are presented with a kind of pseudo-Biblical world, whose credibility is guaranteed rather by the coherence of delicately interconnected poetic structures than by close correspondence to Biblical narratives.

Having gone through the emotionally intense experience of dread and pleasure, in the last stanza, the speaker begins to process this impression by contemplating the ontological status of the spirit of Dante, whose writing has made him experience God. The deeply religious experience raises the theological question of God's indivisibility (lines 25-26). According to *The Second Helvetic Confession* (in accordance with other Christian creedal documents):

> God is one in essence or nature, subsisting in himself, all sufficient in himself, invisible, incorporeal, immense, eternal, Creator of all things both visible and invisible, the greatest good, living, quickening and preserving all things, omnipotent and supremely wise, kind and merciful, just and true. […] Notwithstanding we believe and teach that the same immense, *one and indivisible God* is in person inseparably and without

confusion distinguished as Father, Son and Holy Spirit so, as the Father has begotten the Son from eternity, the Son is begotten by an ineffable generation, and the holy Spirit truly proceeds from them both, and the same from eternity and is to be worshipped with both. (*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)* 1999, 80; emphasis added)

In the form of a question, in a wondering way, the speaker confronts his God-like experience of Dante's spirit with the theological doctrine of God's indivisibility ("unbroken whole", line 26; cf. Horváth 1997, 213). From the confessional point of view, the contradiction, even an implied blasphemy, of Dante's spirit being part of God is obvious. The speaker does not go on speculating in this way, and by raising another reason to explain the creative power of the spirit of Dante (lines 27-28) he implicitly rejects his first conjecture as a possible explanation. His second suggestion, which considers the problem from an epistemological point of view, is dropped as well. These attempts reconfirm both the transcendent character of the feelings the *Comedy* has induced in the speaker and the incomprehensibility of experiencing God, since both of the rational approaches to elucidating what has been experienced fail.

Having no answers to his own questions, the speaker's focus shifts again and, still in a wondering mood, he comes to a conclusion on what effect literary works like Dante's have on men in relation to divinity (lines 29-32). While poetry of the highest quality is presented as something that can be realized once in thousands of years (line 29) and as the result of non-conscious activity (a "dream strays" into a certain world; see line 30), a definite function is ascribed to its *effect*, which is to make man pray to God, who appears to be a point of orientation and comfort. These attributes come from the poetic image of the "mist-hidden Godhead" (line 32), which is a Biblical reference to Yahweh leading and protecting the Israelites while fleeing the Egyptians through the wilderness in seeking the promised land: "And the LORD went before them [the children of Israel] by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people" (Exodus 13: 21-22). In the case of immediate danger at the Sea of Reeds, in a protective manner, the pillar of fire and cloud separated the Israelites and the army of the pharaoh:

> And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them; And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness *to them*, but it gave light by night *to those*; so that the one came not near the other all night. (Exodus 14: 19-20)

In all their travels, the Israelites were constantly guided by the pillar of fire and cloud:

And when the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle the children of Israel went onward in all their journeys; But if the cloud were not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up, For the cloud of the LORD was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys. (Exodus 40: 36-38)

With this Biblical background in mind, it can be argued that the poetic image of the "mist-hidden Godhead" (line 32) is evidently associated with the idea of guidance, assurance of safety and favour and also of the visual manifestation of God's presence. In the Hungarian text, the last two lines of the poem translate as, "So that the unbelieving man may learn to worship the mist-hidden Godhead". Using a clause of purpose in his contemplation, the speaker, who regards men as "unbelieving" (line 31), comes to the realization that, no matter how rarely and how accidentally literary masterpieces of the quality of Dante might materialize, they have a specific and vital purpose: to make men worship God. This is a conclusion, which implies the presupposition or the belief that the mist-hidden God exists. Assigning an extrinsic aim to a masterpiece, the speaker reveals the teleological nature of his mindset. In the articulation of his rationalized interpretation of the effects of the *Divine Comedy*, he contends that men are reconverted or reconfirmed to believe in an omnipotent, awe-inspiring and at the same time caring God. Despite the impersonal way in which he formulates his conclusion, he seems to be one of the unbelieving persons, who has experienced the sublimity of God.

As far as the carefully developed interrelation between sublimity and God is concerned, the poetic coherence of the text is sustained until the very end. In line 29 there is reference to a huge span of time and in the final line there is the image of the mysterious and powerful "mist-hidden Godhead" (line 32), which is included among Arany's many examples of the sublime from the *Old Testament*:

Holy Scripture is full of examples of the sublime: in the Books of Moses there is God, who creates the world by a single word, who decrees his commandments amid thunders and lightning flashes on Mount Sinai; and there is the pillar of fire that led the people of Israel in the wilderness etc.[26]

The fact that Arany's concept of God is closely aligned to sublimity can be justified by other remarks of his. For example, in a letter to Imre Madách (1823-1864) of 1861 he advised his friend on some of the lines of his lyrical drama *The Tragedy of Man*. In the opening lines of Scene 1, the Chorus of Angels praises the Lord for the Creation, to which he replies: "The great work

[26] "A szentírás telve fenséges példákkal: Mózesnél az isten, ki egy szavával teremti a világot; ki a sinai hegyen mennydörgés, villámlás között adja ki parancsait; a tűz oszlop, melly izrael népét vezérli a pusztában stb" (Arany 1962a, 642-643).

has now been completed, true. / The clockwork ticks – and its Maker relaxes. / Until the first cogwheel must be replaced, / it can rotate, for aeons, on its axes"[27]. Though these lines bear the traces of Arany's corrections, his remark on Madách's original version is revealing about his expectations of how sublime a poetic representation of God should be: "In these four lines, God appears to be a self-contented craftsman, which has a tinge of the comic. It is at the beginning of the play and these are God's first words. Should it not be changed for something more sublime?"[28] Arany seems to regard the sublime as a, if not the, means by which an impressive artistic representation of God is feasible.

Arany's reference to man as "unbelieving" brings to light the considerable degree of his secularized approach to the self. In their description of the Enlightenment, Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla characterise the eighteenth century by "large-scale changes in the epistemological grounding", which is further specified as

> the crucial demise of theological certainties in the face of the new beliefs of the Enlightenment. It is this general shift from a situation in which knowledge is grounded in religious belief to one in which a series of interlinked technical discourses determine, legislate and police specific forms of knowledge. (Ashfield, De Bolla 1998, 6)

Accepting secularization as the context for the evolution of the sublime, Robert Doran concludes his study of early modern key theories contending that

> by displacing religious experience into art and the aesthetic experience of nature, the sublime represents a form of resistance to the secularizing tendencies of modern culture, an effort that blurs the category distinction between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, resulting in a kind of 'religion without religion'. (Doran 2015, 286)

Arany's mentality in relation to the sublime can be cited as an example of the general tendency described by Doran. The signs of a nostalgic attitude towards a firm and unshaken faith are present in his poetry. The two lines of "To My Son" (1850) can serve as an iconic example of them: "Would that within my soul were shrined again / The faith unquestioning that life hath slain"[29]. In the absence of firm and unshaken religious faith, Arany seems able to identify a point of reference and orientation by an experience the sublime induces. Thus, his poem, which radically rewrites the norms of contemporary panegyrics, becomes deeply personal not only in relation to Dante but also to poetry and God.

[27] Trans. by Robert Zend in Radó, Andor 2014, 317; "Be van fejezve a nagy mű, igen. / A gép forog, az alkotó pihen. / Év-milliókig eljár tengelyén, / Míg egy kerékfogát ujítni kell" (Madách 2005, 15).

[28] "Az egész négy sor mesteremberes önelégültsége is komikai színben tűnik fel. Annyival inkább, mert a darab elején van, s az első szava istennek. Nem kellene majestatikusabb hangúval cserélni föl?" (János Arany to Imre Madách, in Arany 2004, 601).

[29] Trans. by Nora de Vállyi and Dorothy M. Stuart in De Vállyi, Stuart 1911, 63; "Oh, ha bennem is, mint egykor, épen / Élne a hit, vigaszul nekem! …" (Arany 1951, 86).

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