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## **A Short History of the Sublime in Polish Literature from a Comparative Perspective**

This chapter is based on an analytical survey of the selected literary works of 11 Major figures of the Polish lyric such as *Jan Kochanowski*, *Adam Mickiewicz*, *Juliusz Słowacki*, *Cyprian Kamil Norwid*, *Bolesław Leśmian*, *Aleksander Wat*, *Julian Przyboś*, *Tadeusz Różewicz*, *Miron Białoszewski*, *Zbigniew Herbert* and *Czesław Miłosz* (Płuciennik, 2002). Those authors were chosen for analysis and interpretation because their works are deeply rooted in a “sublimicist” sensitivity and discourse of the sublime or opposed to this discourse. I characterise basic rhetoric devices found in the literary works of art as representations of the experience of the sublime. In the frame of the history of the sublime there has always been a particular kind of dynamics that stems from the tension between the antimimetic element of the sublime and *mimesis*, mainly the *mimesis* of emotion. In my view, there is a strong relationship between the increasingly antimimetic bias in modernist poetry and more universal tendencies in modernist art, namely dehumanisation, intellectualisation and abstraction (Płuciennik, 2000). I would like to claim that the rhetoric of the sublime in the Polish lyric has persisted because of the resistance to the radical dehumanisation and intellectualisation (as in Ortega y Gasset and Hugo Friedrich), because of the opposition to its own antimimetic forces. This resistance follows from the social nature of language as the main substance of the literary

work of art as well as from the generic feature of the lyric that has been always tied to the mimesis of emotions. However the latest representations of the experience of the sublime in the Polish lyric are, in a way, indirect. The main devices used there to make the representations not direct are intertextuality and quoting.

Is it possible to imagine and trace the first appearance of the unimaginable in the history of humankind? Adam Smith, in "Essays on philosophical subjects" from 1758, printed in 1795, wrote that lack of simple account for phenomena of nature, that is to say, lack of imagination, shaped the beginning of philosophy. The marvellous and enchantment caused by natural wonders. Lack of imagination to conceive of a mechanism causing natural phenomena such as wind, moving of the sun, moon, stars and birth, and death (Smith, 1996). But it is not this unimaginable which is at stake here.

There are people who would like to look at the inconceivability of the Old Testament's God as an absolutely unique paradigm of imagination, which stands as a distinguishing mark not only for the people of Israel but also for Christianity, and, last but not least, for Islam. Such an imagination was the main reference and assistance of many authentic religious lives. This imagination makes the soul wider, as Immanuel Kant puts it (Kant 1958: § 29), and it makes vivid and stronger a sense of being, it awakes people to life. In the name of this imagination, through ages, one negates and condemns pagan cultures that are dedicated to that, which is visible and sensual and which is depicted on incalculable woodland altars. In the name of this imagination as well, after the Reformation, many statues and paintings were thrown out from temples in Europe. In the name of just this imagination Talibans in Afghanistan destroyed huge statues of Buddah in March 2001. And then followed a terrorist attack on a contemporary statue of Western Civilisation: Twin Towers. Osama ben Laden was talking about this in an iconoclastic manner before the attacks on America in September. This imagination is based on enthusiasm, it evokes enthusiasm; it, one would like to say, is enthusiasm. As Eliane Escobas puts it, this imagination is a faculty of creation of the unimaginable (Escoubas, 1993). Moreover, from time to time, the enthusiasm turns into intolerance. It is significant that Edmund Burke, one of the three main figures in the theory

of the sublime, in his early writings on the sublime from 1759 (Burke, 1958), seems to accept enthusiastic and violent facets of the sublime. However, in later reflections on the revolution in France of 1790 (Burke, 1996), revolution, which is regarded as a peak of a political sublime (Ashfield & de Bolla, 1996), he observes with terror the actual escalation of the violence during “advances” of the French revolution, which culminated in insulting and decapitating the king, the archetypical figure of the sublime. Excess of such imagery in the arts and literature becomes much more easily accepted in the long 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (1688–1815). Then, there was a significant change in accounting of genius, for example. “Genius” began to mean a person with natural talents, which made possible extraordinary achievements, earlier possible with assistance of supernatural and trans-human spirits. So genius bears connotations of transgression (Mason, 1993). And representations of the sublime experience in literature at this time also bear this factor evoking political and moral transgression.

Many theorists of the sublime, above all Kant and Hegel (Modiano, 1987) emphasise the role of the Decalogue in the building of foundations for such an iconoclastic type of imagination. According to Kant (§ 29) the Commandment I am talking here about, forbidding making a material resemblance or image, is the most sublime passage of Torah. There are two traditions in numbering this Commandment: the Catholic and Lutheran churches make it a part of the First Commandment but the Orthodox and Reformed churches treat it as a separated second Commandment. Kant assigns to this Commandment a huge role in evoking enthusiasm of Jews for their own religion, when they compare themselves with other pagan nations. He writes also about pride of Muslims in this context. However, Kant accounts for an opposition to the sublime as well. And it is not a plain style. The opposite of the sublime phenomenon consists of image worshipping. He considers also rhetorical and political dimension of this cult of paintings and statues: governments employ the cult in order to constrain imagination of their serfs, codify their imagery, and make impossible expansion of an individual soul. A serf becomes passive and it is easy to lead her/him. One of recent slogans in Polish advertising was a sentence: “Imagination is dynamite”. But the true dynamite is the unimaginable, that is to

say, the sublime. For this reason, the prophet and pope of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, following Adorno, views the sublime as a main device of the iconoclastic avant-garde techniques (Lyotard 1982, 1982, 1984, 1993, 1994).

The result of my historical survey of 11 Polish poets is a thesis that we should be aware of a strong literary tradition in Polish literature, which employs an iconoclastic, in an etymological sense, imagery. I use here the term “sublimicism” invented by Paul Crowther in his 1993 book on aesthetics of postmodernism. According to him, sublimicism is a movement in the contemporary arts, which is very close to the abstract expressionism. But I use this term in a wider sense. I would like to talk here on sublimicist imagination. Thanks to it, we can describe many phenomena from different times and different literary movements. Literary works included in this tradition represent similar cultural and imaginative experience using iconoclastic devices. There were theorists of the sublime who underlined a trans-generic character of the sublime (Ramazani 1989). We cannot constraint ourselves to epochs, to media, styles, to literary genres. Already Pseudo-Longinos puts this problem in a different way.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, we can find an enthusiast and theorist of the sublimicist literature: Robert Lowth who wrote his lectures *Praelectiones de Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* published in 1753 and translated into English as “Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews” in 1787 (Lowth, 1996). The lectures were famous in Poland at this time (Borowski, 1972) and Lowth’s ideas were already in the cultural air of this period.

It is not easy to define the sublimicist imagination. In order to do it, I catalogue gathered exemplification of sublimicist lyric images in 4 series. Then, I try to account for an ideal model of lyric as an evoker of the experience of the sublime. This model can be described using an act of Annunciation. God, using a word of an Angel, incarnates himself. Word becomes flesh. Word becomes enthusiasm.

In the first series, I describe images linked to the representations of the infinite and supernatural. In these images, antimimetic evocation prevails as well as iconoclastic attitude towards reader’s imagination. The central representation here is limitless God, and the Hidden God, the unrepresentable

and unconceivable. It is characteristic that motives of mental transgression are strictly tied to those representations. This mental transgression means very often transcendence of this world in catastrophic and apocalyptic imagery or imagery connected to a before-death perspective. Representations of a contact with the Transcendent God are included here as well as representations of human dignity coming from his/her spirituality (universal priesthood of man or even God in man). In the West, such an imagination had a religious outlet. In Poland, significantly, such motives were an important part of the Polish Church of Literature.<sup>1</sup>

In the second series, I consider representations of the natural order and architectural representations in the lyric poetry. They are sometimes tied to the social and political architecture. I describe inspirational huge open spaces of the Polish lyric: images of the Far North in Russia; representations of invaders' space, particularly, the gothic imagery connected with an image of Germans; also open spaces of Ukraine as a most inspiring for Polish nationalism. I account also for images of Mediterranean Sea and images of artificial infinity in Leśmian's poetry where two mirrors confront each other. In an avant-garde lyric, we find an urban space connected with the experience of the technological sublime. Recently, one can discover open spaces of the World War II destruction, spaces of the Holocaust, and empty axiological space of the communist ruling. They all function as angelic, inspiring spaces used to announce a sacred word to the reader.

In the third series, I deal with motives related to the experience of an aura of the past: a mythological motive of "a song" as a church of national memories, literary encounters with spirits of the past, openness to resonance with the past and pietistic relationship towards archetypical images of the past. Here we can also find an idea of the National Sacred Book and a model of literature as an eerie house of spiritualistic encounters.

The fourth series is devoted to representations of transport associated with struggle against adversity and hardship. With those images we can combine representations of absolute solitude and negligence, national martyrdom. But we can also find here the imperial sublime and the sublime

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<sup>1</sup> This is an idea present in the Polish Romanticism, an era of a nation without an independent state.

connected with political opposition in a totalitarian regime. *Czesław Miłosz*, in a recent work, creates an image of opposition and estrangement in us.

Associated with all the images just mentioned is a model of the lyric as Annunciation. First, in the lyric of all times there are formulas of the sublime such as presenting the unrepresentable, expressing the inexpressible, saying the unsayable. They all signal a wish to represent and, at the same time, an impossibility to represent.

A model of lyric as annunciation is present in contexts of such formulas of the sublime. The lyric announces a word, which becomes flesh inside a reader. A virtual reader must have a particular attitude towards the sacred word of the lyric. This attitude is perfectly described in the Song of Songs, by the attitude of the beloved from this mystic work. It is necessary to humiliate oneself in order to be transported by the sublime lyric word. This model is using a model of erotic relationship between the lover and the beloved, God and a soul of the reader. It may also take a form of particular ecstatic devices such as gradation and accumulation (Holmqvist & Pluciennik, 2002). It is significant that the most typical and advanced forms of amplification and gradation can be found in the Romantic poetry. I would like to refer here to a poem by a Polish Romantic prophet, *Adam Mickiewicz*. It is called "To Spin Love". In the first stanza, Mickiewicz accumulates images of centrifugal move: spinning love is similar to spinning spider web, to water in a spring, to wind blowing in the sky etc. In the second stanza, we can find an incantation where rhythmic structure induces power in the audience as in Platonic magnetic rings from *Ion*.

*First, your might will be as the might of Nature,  
Then, your might will be as the might of elements,  
And then, your might will be as the might of spreading,  
And then, as the might of humans, and then as the might of Angels,  
Finally, your might will be as the might of the God, the Creator.*

This is an ecstatic, mystic and, paradoxically enough, magic ladder to heaven. It is possible, however, to find gradation and accumulation even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish poetry written after World War II, particularly in

*Zbigniew Herbert's* works. But there, the gradation functions as an allusion and a remainder of the past possibilities for the lyric transport.

For obvious reasons, philosophical and religious works prevail in my survey of the Polish lyric poetry. But the survey contains also political agitations, erotic verses, meta-poetic works, and parodies of glossolalia and revelations (Płuciennik, 1999).

In the futurist period, *Aleksander Wat* wrote his "Pug Iron Stove".<sup>2</sup> It was a kind of parody of the poetics of Polish neoromanticism. One of the most famous fragments of the work: "THE ABSOLUTE. A sexless whore with a bronze forehead, motionless throughout the vibrations of years and universes" (translation by Venclova, 1996, p. 66), was commented on by *Włodzimierz Bolecki*: "This is a futurist end of the Young Poland" (Bolecki, 1991, p. 154). This fragment can be viewed as such, since it mocks at the neoromantic language of revelation and epiphany.<sup>3</sup>

The history of the sublime in the Polish lyric, a superficial overview of which I tried to present here, starts with *Jan Kochanowski*, a 16<sup>th</sup> century poet, because his psalms were trans-denominational (inspired by Buchanan's version). This tradition of basic sensibility, directed towards inconceivability of God and the huge world, was continued by great romantic poets such as *Mickiewicz*, *Słowacki*, *Krasiński* and *Norwid*. The Major break comes with *Leśmian* whose poetry, on one hand, hyperbolises the traditional images of infinity, on the other, reveals some nihilistic cracks. He is fascinated with images which might be compared to an image of black rose: a plant which did not exist at this time, but was a romantic figure fascinating for poetic imagination. This is the first step towards nihilistic blasphemies of the futurists and intellectual lyric of the poets of the avant-garde in general.

The opposition towards this tradition is visible particularly well in the works of *Tadeusz Różewicz* and *Zbigniew Herbert*. Paradoxically, both poets function in contemporary Poland as emblems of ethical writers. It is apparent that the sublime experience has a morally neutral meaning. The sublime may be used in a good and bad manner and for good and bad goals. Both poets would think that to experience the sublime transport is to

<sup>2</sup> Ja z jednej strony i Ja z drugiej strony mego mopsożelaznego piecyka (1920).

<sup>3</sup> On characteristics of the epiphanic style of the Polish neoromanticism see Nycz (1996).

put oneself in a dangerous position. In addition, Różewicz views the sublime with suspicion because he associates it with a dominant western patriarchal culture of the spirit, which discredited itself during the World War II. What was left in representational politics after the war disaster was body and feminine values. Moreover, stereotyped young feminine values were not important anymore, but those belonging to old women were praised.

From this perspective, *Miron Białoszewski*, *Czesław Miłosz* and *Julian Przyboś* seem to be completely different. Białoszewski transports and elevates ordinary phenomena such as colander and stove. Miłosz gives the best incarnation of the sublime in his incantations and rhythm of his poetry. Other poetic device used by him is intertextuality. He sometimes cites discourses of angels and prophets. At other times, he identifies himself with the dead. The main device, however, is a peculiar cult of objectivity. He wants us to see particular things in an objective, particular and, at the same time, general way.

*Julian Przyboś* is simply fascinated by open space typical for a rural life and, at the same time, by the technological sublime of huge buildings such as gothic cathedrals and urban architecture.

I can summarise my survey and say that the history of the sublime in the Polish lyric confirms the modernist turning point: something came to an end then, high emotionality of the lyric was not obvious anymore, let alone the highest ecstasy of the sublime. The model of literary reception changed, empathy with an author was not an obligation anymore and a humiliated attitude towards sacred words of the literary work became out of fashion.

But some examples of Miłosz and Herbert's poetry show that the modernist turning point was not so radical as it appeared to Ortega y Gasset, Hugo Friedrich, and Wilhelm Worringer. Abstraction or intellectualisation of the lyric has its limits. Readers still read the lyric in order to transcend themselves ("be ecstatic" meant "be outside") and readers still read the lyric in order to fill himself/herself with other identity, different, but yet similar one. However, it does not mean that we can find in the Polish poetry of today the lyric similar to the speeches of ancient prophets of Israel. Today, poets evoke the sublime using negation and subtle images such as a black rose.

From a thundering prophet to a black rose. The history of the Polish lyric shows that the lyric in general fits well romantic sensibility. If this is



true, is it right then to define modernity by the dominance of intellectual values? Is it true that the Enlightenment shaped modernity much more than the 19<sup>th</sup> century revolutions? Readers still empathise with authors in the lyric. Modernism protested against empathy but the lyric has strong bias to be dramatic (in a Brechtian sense). People communicate with subjects in the lyric and authors want to communicate with people, want to persuade them emotionally, that is to say they want to fill them up with their-like emotions and attitudes. Annunciation as a model of the lyric is still in force today, but the Angel does not, symbolically, impregnate by using a figure of a thundering prophet, he rather skims impersonally and goes away. He even denies his existence. But this negation can evoke past experiences, because culture is based on memory.