

The Notion of the “Sublime” in Contemporary English, French and Hungarian Literary Criticism

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1 Postmodern Approach

Scholars have become more interested than ever in the old, aesthetic category of the sublime in the past decade or so. Postmodern thinkers have recognized the problem concerning it, one they have been dealing with for a long time: the question of unspeakable expressions coming from its very essence. Jean-François Lyotard has written several works about these investigations. He says in his study, *Le sublime et l'avant-garde*: “Le mot *sublime* est aujourd’hui d’un usage courant en français populaire pour signifier ce qui provoque l’étonnement (à peu près le *great* américain) et l’admiration. Mais l’idée qu’il connote appartient aussi à la réflexion la plus rigoureuse sur l’art depuis au moins deux siècles. Newman [viz. Barnett Baruch Newman, painter] n’ignore pas l’enjeu esthétique et philosophique auquel le mot *sublime* est attaché. [...] Quand donc il recherche la sublimité dans l’ici et le maintenant, Newman rompt avec l’éloquence de l’art romantique, mais il n’en rejette pas la tâche fondamentale, qui est que l’expression picturale ou autre soit le témoin de l’inexprimable. L’inexprimable ne réside pas en un là-bas, un autre monde, un autre temps, mais en ceci: qu’il arrive (quelque chose).”¹

This question is closely related to the most recent interest towards the philosophy of Kant. Without mention of other traits of the Kant-renaissance, it is enough to refer to various motifs related to the category of the sublime. It is the *analysis of the sublime* in *Critic of Judgement* that becomes the main starting point of new thinkers, but their interpretations often seem reinterpretations as is pointed out by Jörg Zimmermann² and Miklós Almási.³ Le sentiment du sublime, dit Lyotard, “un plaisir mêlé de

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, “Le sublime et l’avant-garde,” in *L’inhumain*, Paris, 1988, 104; cf. “L’instant, Newman,” in op. cit., 89–99; Bertalan Pethő, *Postmodern*, Budapest, 1992, 108–114.

² “A fenséges képei,” (Pictures of the Sublime) in *Enigma* Nos. 11–12, 33–49.

³ “Egy fogalom rekonstrukciója,” (The reconstruction of a notion) in *Holmi* 1992, September, 1259–1263.

peine, un plaisir qui vient de la peine. A l'occasion d'un objet grand, le désert, une montagne, une pyramide, ou très puissant, une tempête sur l'océan, l'éruption d'un volcan, s'éveille l'idée d'un absolu, qui ne peut qu'être pensée et doit rester sans intuition sensible, comme une Idée de la raison. La faculté de présentation, l'imagination, échoue à fournir une représentation convenable de cette Idée. [...] Ce dérèglement des facultés entre elles donne lieu à l'extrême tension (l'agitation, dit [Kant]) qui caractérise la pathos du sublime à la différence du calme sentiment du beau."⁴ As we know, the problem of expression and representation is not a crucial element of the intellectual world of Kant. Lyotard's idea that "L'avant-gardisme est ainsi en germe dans l'esthétique kantienne de sublime"⁵, therefore, can be considered strong extrapolation.

Scholars' postmodern interest in the notion of the sublime has induced big development in typical historical research as well: several papers and volumes of essays were published under this subject matter: studies on the relationship between the sublime and painting were published in *New Literary History* (1985); the temporal dimensions of the concept were focussed on in *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* in 1986 from antique writers to the XXth century; while *Mercur* highlighted the sublime and modernity, the sublime and politics in 1989. A special 1995 issue of *Enigma* dealt with the notion of the sublime publishing relevant papers by Lyotard and Marc Richir in Hungarian for the first time.

2 Period or Discourse?

Basic critical works dealing with the XVII–XVIIIth century history of the sublime, such as monographs by Samuel Holt Monk⁶ and Théodore A. Litman⁷ aimed at analysing periods of the development of the concept. On the other hand, the recent English and French literature I know mostly agrees on describing various discourses of the sublime while accepting the existence of historical metamorphoses.⁷ This is due to the fact that the concept is regarded to have uncertain outlines, ones

⁴ "Le sublime et l'avant-garde," in op. cit., 109–110; cf. "Après le sublime, état de l'esthétique," in op. cit., 147–155; Bertalan Pethő, *Postmodern*, Budapest, 1992, 106–108, 291–296, 296–298.

⁵ "Le sublime et l'avant-garde," in op. cit., 110.

⁶ *The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-century England*, The University of Michigan Press, 1960.

⁷ *Le sublime en France (1660–1714)*, Paris, 1971.

which cannot be interpreted in the homogenous medium of the history of aesthetics only. The independent discipline of aesthetics had not existed before the second half of the XVIIIth century, so meditation of this kind quite naturally came about in rhetorical, philosophical, political and other contexts.

It is clearly pointed out in the introduction of a monograph by Samuel Holt Monk: "To reduce to any sort of order the extremely diverse and individualistic theories of sublimity that one finds in the eighteenth century is not easy."⁸ After outlining the nature of difficulty arising, however, he describes his impressive sketch of evolution: "I have therefore grouped the theories together loosely under very general headings in an effort to indicate that there is a progress, slow and continuous, but that this progress is one of organic growth. Ideas in individual treatises often advance it imperceptibly. The direction of this growth is toward the subjectivism of Kant. Based at first on the rhetorical treatise of Longinus as interpreted by Boileau, the sublime slowly develops at the hands of such writers as Dennis, Addison, Baillie, Hume, Burke, Kames, Reid, and Alison into a subjective or semi-subjective concept."⁹ Thus the pillars of development are the discovery of Longinos by Boileau in the second half of the XVIIth century, a treatise by Edmund Burke in the middle of the XVIIIth century and the critical theory by Kant towards the end of the century. These pillars are so much highlighted that the "story" of the sublime is often reduced to them, which can be observed in two French encyclopedias as well published in 1997.¹⁰ Further simplification is achieved by the fact that Kant is introduced through his interpretation of the notion of the sublime in *Critique of Judgement*, while his earlier work, the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* [*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (Königsberg 1764)] substantially differs from his later work, as was pointed out by Paul Crowther.¹¹

As far as the story of evolution written by Samuel Monk is concerned Peter de Bolla thinks "that mid-eighteenth-century accounts

⁸ Op. cit., 3.

⁹ Op. cit., 4.

¹⁰ *Dictionnaire européenne des Lumières*, publié sous la direction de Michel Delon, Paris, 1997, 1013–1016 (William Hauptman); *Dictionnaire des Genres et notions littéraires*, ed. Alain Michel, Paris, 1997, 757–770 (Baldine Saint Girons).

¹¹ *The Kantian Sublime. From Morality to Art*, Oxford, 1989, 8–15.

of the sublime do not assume a unified subject: they resist such a concept".¹² Thus he considers the conceptual boundaries of the notion of the sublime extremely uncertain, whereby he finds another approach: "the autonomous subject, a conceptualization of human subjectivity based on the self-determination of the subject and the perception of the uniqueness of every individual, is the product of a set of discourses present to the period 1756–63, the period of the Seven Years War."¹³ He calls this group of discourses "discursive network", and treats sublime as a part of this interpreting it as two kinds of discourse. "I have used a distinction between two kinds of discourse: the first, a discourse on something, is to be taken as a discrete discourse, a discourse which is to be read in a highly specific way, within a very well defined context. [...] This discourse on something is to be distinguished from a discourse of something. [...] the discourse of something may well subsume a large number of discrete discourses."¹⁴ Thus the notion of the sublime may lose its unifying capability whereby it becomes possible for the extremely rich context to be comprehended.

The uncertain outlines of the sublime are reflected by the division of the reader containing essays which was edited by Peter de Bolla and Andrew Ashfield.¹⁵ After the introduction of the Longinian tradition at the beginning of the XVIIIth century passages entitled *Rhapsody to Rhetoric* were selected from the whole century which were only very loosely joined. The most common feature shared by them seems the moral-philosophical question and search for ways of expression. The part cited from Samuel Johnson's dictionary is illuminating in terms of the immanent divergence of the concept as it describes 14 meanings within the 6 word class variants of the sublime. The lack of unified classification comes from the very concept of the notion of the sublime as it cannot be treated as a unified discourse.

Similar ideas can be observed in Pierre Hartmann's approach as well: "nous avons vu se déployer quatre types de discours assez nettement différenciés pour qu'il paraisse possible de les identifier et de les nommer. Ce furent, respectivement, les discours poétiques, esthétiques,

¹² *The Discourse of the Sublime*, Oxford, 1989, 293.

¹³ Op. cit., 6.

¹⁴ Op. cit., 9–10.

¹⁵ *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

philosophique et dramatique. Ces discours, nous avons tenté de les analyser comme autant d'entités perméables sans doute l'une à l'autre, mais néanmoins closes sur elle-même et investies d'une cohérence que nous nous sommes attaché à mettre en relief."¹⁶ Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne achieves the same result on her own when she says: "Débordant les textes théoriques sur l'art pour informer des poétiques et des mythologies personnelles, le sublime fonctionne, nous semble-t-il, à trois niveaux: il relève d'une métaphysique et d'une philosophie de l'art; il peut être un code implicite, un axe thématique ou idéologique propre à un univers imaginaire; il participe enfin à l'histoire des idées."¹⁷ The notion of the sublime is divided in the various discourses, and it unites elements of the various discourses from another point of view. It is associated with other theories in the history of aesthetics: the notion of the sublime inevitably arises during the analysis of the notion of genius, creative imagination, originality etc. as can be observed in works by Roland Mortier, James Engell, Georges Gusdorf, Michel Delon and others.¹⁸ Summerizing monographs by René Wellek, Meyer Howard Abrams and Jacques Chouillet treat it in the very same context.¹⁹

3 National Variants and Ranges of Interpretation

The works mentioned above can be divided into two markedly distinct groups by reason of the fact that they approach the period analysed (the second half of the XVIIIth century) from the point of view of romanticism (perhaps preromanticism) or classicism (neoclassicism). I cannot touch upon the problem of this conceptual dichotomy and interpretation of literary period, which is generally represented by the differences in the traditions of interpretation in France and England as

¹⁶ *Du Sublime (De Boileau à Schiller)*, Strasbourg, 1997, 165.

¹⁷ *La poétique du sublime de la fin des Lumières au romantisme*, Paris, 1997, 14.

¹⁸ Roland Mortier, *L'originalité: Une nouvelle catégorie esthétique au siècle des Lumières*, Genève, 1982; James Engell, *The Creative Imagination. Enlightenment to Romanticism*, Harvard University Press, 1981; Georges Gusdorf, *Fondements du savoir romantique*, Paris, 1982; Michel Delon, *L'idée d'énergie au tournant des Lumières (1770-1820)*, Paris, 1988.

¹⁹ René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950 I. The Later Eighteenth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955; Meyer Howard Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, Oxford, 1953; Jacques Chouillet, *L'Esthétique des Lumières*, Paris, 1974.

well as in Italy and Germany. I would only like to point out the contact points of this dichotomy with the notion of the sublime.

The notion of the sublime breaks away from rhetoric in the second half of the XVIIIth century as is pointed out in terms of the French literature by Théodore A. Litman. Its interpretation had been worked out by the middle of the XVIIIth century (let us think of Burke), which is closely related to the contemporary emotionalist tendencies: this is exactly why the sublime is judged to belong to romanticism (preromanticism). The link between the sublime and emotionalism, however, is so tight that the notion seems closed in other directions. German art theory thinkers also striving to grasp at the notion of the sublime such as Winckelmann and his followers introduced the notions of grace, reinterpreted beauty and harmony, and perfection. Traditions of art criticism analysing this direction elaborated the theory of neoclassicism. Let us not forget, however, that this means interpreting the sublime too, but it is different from its emotionalist variant.

By virtue of what has been said it is no wonder that Winckelmann's name cannot be found in Samuel Monk's excellent book, and that Peter de Bolla²⁰ criticising Monk for disregarding the differences between English and German traditions does not put down his name either, though it is him who analyses the 1750s and 1760s (while focussing on English literature though). The notion of the sublime does not occur in monographies by Abrams and Wellek in connection with what might be identified as efforts by Winckelmann, and Abrams does not even mention it. It is only in a monograph by Dominique Peyrache-Leborgne from the works on the sublime (the ones that I know of) that I found reference to another interpretation of the sublime, and even she mentions Winckelman as opposed to Diderot: "C'est «la belle nature» et «certain beautés idéales de cette nature» qui constituent pour lui le support du sublime. [...] le terme «sublime» («erhaben») relève d'une conception platonicienne de «la beauté comme Idée», mais incarnée dans la forme; il est surtout un équivalent de la perfection, une représentation finie de l'infini. [...] Avec Winckelmann, le sublime se trouve donc dans l'ouvre d'art définie comme «totalité autosuffisante», intérieurement cohérente, «sans autre fin qu'elle-même»".²¹

²⁰ Op. cit., 293.

²¹ Op. cit., 125–126.

Emotionalist sublime (*sublime* par excellence) is called romantic in the range of interpretation. Neoclassicism, however, is characterized by the *sublime* (used in another sense), that is the word qualified becomes attributive, there being no other free place for it. It is used in basic monographs by Mario Praz and Hugh Honour as well.²² Roland Mortier,²³ Jacques Chouillet²⁴ and Binni Walter²⁵ equally reflect on the emotionalist and neoclassicist variants of the sublime emphasizing the close relations between them. György Mihály Vajda points out the parallels between these variants of the sublime too in a great essay written in French,²⁶ which is the first element in analysing interpretations of the notion of the sublime in Hungarian literature.

4 Interpretations in Hungarian Literary History

It is the approach mentioned above that is the most elaborated in the Hungarian literature, following the basic study of József Szauder.²⁷ The interpretation of the sublime included in the notion of neoclassicism, and the introduction of the emotional and perfectionist sublime as a complementary phenomenon become widely known primarily owing to Péter Sárközy and József Pál applying the results of Italian literary criticism, and mainly Walter Binni.²⁸ At the same time, their analyses highlight the

²² Mario Praz, *Gusto neoclassico*, Firenze, 1940 (in English: *On Neoclassicism*, translated by Angus Davidson, London 1969); Hugh Honour, *Neo-classicism*, Penguin Books, 1968 (in Hungarian: *Klasszicizmus*, translated by Szabolcs Várady, Budapest, 1991).

²³ "'Sensibilité,' 'Néo-classique' ou 'Préromantisme,'" in *Le Préromantisme*, Actes du Colloque de Clermont-Ferrand, Paris, 1975, 310–318.

²⁴ Op. cit. 186–216; cf. Imre Vörös, "Neoklasszicizmus és forradalom – Marie-Joseph Chénier munkásságának tükrében," (Neoclassicism and Revolution—in the oeuvre of Marie-Joseph Chénier) in *Folytonosság vagy fordulat?* (Continuity or turning-point?) ed. Attila Debreczeni, Debrecen, 1996, 163–164.

²⁵ *Classicismo e neoclassicismo nella letteratura del Settecento*, Firenze, 1963; cf. József Pál, *A neoklasszicizmus poétikája*, (The poetics of Neoclassicism) Budapest, 1988, 17–23 and Péter Sárközy, *Petrarcától Ossziánig* (From Petrarca to Ossian) Budapest, 1988, 100–124.

²⁶ "La dimension esthétique de la poésie," in *Le tournant du siècle des Lumières 1760–1820*, ed. György Mihály Vajda, Budapest, 1982, 155–212.

²⁷ "A klasszicizmus kérdései és a klasszicizmus a felvilágosodás magyar irodalmában," (The Problems of Classicism and the Classicism in the Hungarian Enlightenment Literature) in *Az Este és Az Álom*, (The Evening and The Sleep) Budapest, 1970, 92–122.

²⁸ See note 25.

notion of *grace*, which, when regarded as related to *the beautiful* and *the sublime*, offers us to grasp the neoclassicist notion of the sublime in a more plastic way (and to name it too).

The notions *sublime* and *grace* interpreted in terms of neoclassicism was primarily applied in literary history while analysing the life-work of Ferenc Kazinczy. It was László Gergye, who observed the myth of grace from the 1780s till the end of his career,²⁹ while Lajos Csetri revealed the depths of contexts of “higher style” playing a crucial role in the formation of Kazinczy’s stylistic endeavours.³⁰ What is very significant in its interpretation is that the system of comparison of “higher style” could be found in the highly rhetoric literary consciousness of contemporary Hungary, and it was not the aesthetic contexts of the sublime themselves which had been thoroughly elaborated in Europe that were applied.³¹

The notion of the sublime arose theoretically not only with Kazinczy but with Csokonai and Berzsenyi as well, the former in a study by József Szauder,³² while the latter in that of Lajos Csetri,³³ related to the concept of neoclassicism in both cases. Furthermore, works dating back to earlier times rather highlight the emotionalist *sublime* interpretation. Andor Tarnai³⁴ analysed the debate on Milton between Batsányi and József Rajnis at the end of the 1780s, Márta Mezei gave an overview of theoretical works on the sublime by János Batsányi, János Földi and József Péczeli.³⁵

This is all the material available at present. Other philosophical and aesthetical works can be mentioned as well (like books by Ágnes Heller and Éva Kocziszky,³⁶ a study by Zsolt Pálfalusi,³⁷ etc.) but they naturally do not enforce the aspects of literary history. No book has been written

²⁹ *Műzsák és Gráciák között*, (Between Muses and Graces) Budapest, 1998.

³⁰ *Egység vagy különbözőség?* (Unity or Diversity?) Budapest, 1990.

³¹ Op. cit., 55–56.

³² “Csokonai poétikájához,” (The Poetic of Csokonai) in *Az éj és a csillagok*, (The Night and the Stars) Budapest, 1980, 339–367.

³³ *Nem sokaság hanem lélek*, (Not Crowd but Soul) Budapest, 1986, 24–42.

³⁴ “A deákos klasszicizmus és a Milton-vita,” (Latinistic Classicism and the Milton-debate) in *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 1959, 67–83.

³⁵ *Felvilágosodás kori líránk Csokonai előtt*, (Hungarian Enlightenment Poetry before Csokonai) Budapest, 1974, 18–19, 47–50.

³⁶ Ágnes Heller, *A szép fogalma*, (The notion of the Beauty) Budapest 1998; Éva Kocziszky, *Pán, a gondolkodók istene*, (Pan, the God of the Philosophers) Budapest, 1998.

³⁷ “A fenséges és fölényes,” (The Sublime and the Supercilious) in *Enigma* 1995, No. 2, 90–106.

on the theme being described, and there has not even been an essay written on it. On the other hand several papers have been published in the English and French literature recently, not to speak of works each focussing on one writer (e.g. Angela Leighton's Shelley or Theresa M. Kelley', David B. Pirie' and Richard G. Swartz' Wordsworth³⁸). The approaches are rather varied in terms of basic issues as well. What can be learnt from this account? How can the notion of the sublime be applied when analysing the Hungarian literary approaches of XVIIIth century?

5 Conclusions

a. The notion of the sublime is not a unified concept and it cannot be understood by depicting an autonomous history of evolution. Its elements are embedded in discourses of different kinds, which means from another aspect that the discourse of the sublime unites in itself all the elements of the various discourses.

b. Its variants can be distinguished on the basis of various aspects of equal ranks which are in an interactive relationship with each other too. In terms of time (e.g. Boileau, Burke, Kant); as national variants (French, English, Irish, Scottish, German and Italian); thematically (natural, religious, literary, fine art); as variants of an epoch (attitudes of Burke, Gerard, Blair, Diderot and Winckelmann were formed in the 1750s, 1760s).

c. Emotionalist and neoclassicist interpretations of the sublime can be very closely related to each other. The introduction of the notion of *grace* is very promising in the case of the latter.

d. The sublime, as an aesthetic category and stylistic approach can be interpreted even when compared to rhetoric attitude, which was especially significant under still unformed conditions of Hungarian literary criticism at the end of the XVIIIth century.

³⁸ Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, Cambridge University Press, 1984; Theresa M. Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, 1988; David B. Pirie, *William Wordsworth: The Poetry of Grandeur and of Tenderness*, London and New York, 1982; Richard G. Swartz, *Wordsworth and the Political Sublime*, San Diego, 1986.

e. The sublime is the aesthetic discourse of sensibility.³⁹ It was the carrier of attitudes and programmes in the Hungarian literature of the XVIIIth century, which significantly influenced processes of literary revival.

(Trans. Gyula Dávid)

³⁹ Cf. Attila Debreczeni, “‘Érzékenység’ és ‘érzékeny irodalom,’” (“Sensibility” and “sensible literature”) in *Irodalomtörténet* 1999, 12–29.