

Paulina Wojtowicz-Maryjka, *The figures of sublimity in Stefan Chwin's writings*: Abstract

The study is concerned with the presence and meaning of the category of sublimity and its diverse planes in Stefan Chwin's creative output. The author of the study portrays the dimensions of the Gdańsk writer's works, in which the experience of sublimity plays an important sense-making role. The analysis and interpretation of Chwin's novels, essays and diary excerpts not only aims at creating an array of motifs, phenomena or objects, with which the author of *Death in Danzig* provokes the effect of sublimity, but it also helps show the meaning of the experience of sublimity for his entire writing.

Chapter One of the study, titled *From the theory of style to the outlook on the world. A few remarks on the category of sublimity in literature* describes the mere notion of sublimity. The author presents the major definitions of *wzniosłość* [the Polish term for sublimity, nobility, loftiness, solemnity, grandeur] that have emerged over the centuries. Among other things, she reminds the reader of the key points of Pseudo-Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* and of Edmund Burke's dissertation titled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. She also quotes the concepts developed by Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Erich Auerbach as well by Jean-François Lyotard. When presenting these issues, the researcher also makes use of academic literature, in particular of the excellent works by Jarosław Pluciennik, titled *Retoryka wzniosłości w dziele literackim* [The rhetoric of sublimity in literary works] and *Figury niewyobrażalnego* [The figures of the inconceivable]. *Notes on the poetics of sublimity in Polish literature*. The aim of the author's presentation of the diverse concepts of sublimity is to prepare the research tools to be used further on in this dissertation, while also using the art of interpreting and the problems of ekphrasis and the interference of arts.

The researcher depicts the history of sublimity as a peculiar illustration of the interesting process of widening of the semantic range of the notion in question and she convinces that the reflection on sublimity was full of remarks on the source of that experience, and picked up linguistic, psychological, ethical and aesthetic threads. Important visions of human reality were created many times based on those threads. Original concepts of arts, including the art of literature, were also developed. The author stresses that the creative output of Stefan Chwin can be a fine example of that.

In Chapter Two, which has been given the title *The ekphrastic evocation of sublimity: Caspar David Friedrich's painting in Stefan Chwin's novels*, the author deals with the works,

in which the Gdańsk writer makes references to the works of one of the greatest Romanticism artists. Caspar David Friedrich's painting is an essential element of Chwin's writings and the source of evoking sublimity in his novels. In this chapter, the researcher shows the writer's original way of reinterpreting Friedrich's pictures. In the novel *Death in Danzig*, it is the *Mountain Cross*. It symbolically reflects the problems, with which the main characters are beset: suffering, alienation or loss of meaning in life. In *Panna Ferbelin* [Miss Ferbelin], the recurring Friedrich's picture is that titled *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. It not only presents the sublime contemplation of nature but also reflects the great loneliness of a man standing on the edge of existential precipice or wielding ultimate power.

The author also analyses other motifs typical of Friedrich's painting. Those motifs include characters moving with their back turned to the observer, clouds, sea, fog, precipices, ships etc. The scholar presents evidence to support the theory that the literary pictures created by Chwin gain a sublime, picturesque perspective thanks to the idea of correspondence of arts. With this gain, they can have a stronger effect in the reader's imagination. This in turn allows the writer to create an atmosphere of sublimity that induces the reader to stand up to what is inexpressible and evokes melancholy. Friedrich's ekphrases are quite frequent in Chwin's novels. They are a form of reminding us that we still move around a world full of mysteries. The analyses performed by the author allow her to reveal one of the sources of Chwin's fascination for the experience of sublimity which forms a very important basis for the aesthetic qualities of his novel.

Chapter Three, titled *The sublime spaces* shows the ways of uplifting the reality by using the major city spots, typical of Gdańsk topography, as, first of all, Oliwa—the quarter of the city that has the closest connections to the writer's childhood. The author shows that Chwin uses the characteristics of buildings and places to create specific aesthetic maps in his novels. On those maps, Gdańsk appears to the reader as a city of sublimity. So, the reader encounters St. Mary's Church which in the novels is a peculiar column supporting the horizon. The Church is often accompanied by the Town Hall, from which the main characters contemplate in silence the wide and difficult-to-grasp vista of the city and the world.

In Chwin's writings, the sublimity connected with the building size expresses the desire for experiencing the world from another perspective and issues a challenge to the imagination to stand up to the new view. The curious vision of Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science, placed in the Gdańsk space in the work *A short story about a joke*, can be read in that way. There is a place that involves a thrilling aesthetic experience, one that shapes the human identity. It is the Oliwa Cathedral, a place where the sublimity of architecture, the arts

and religious experience meet together. The contemplation accompanying the meeting with the Cathedral often involves reflection on the mysteries of the world and the human existence, which is the predominant feature of Chwin's writing.

The deliberations on the human fate and the nature of the world are also stimulated by other vantage points: the Gradowa Góra and Pacholek Hills. The walks to the hills are aesthetic and cognitive in character: they reveal the riddles from the past and involve a physical experience of height, the largeness of the world, existential reflection, the feeling of strangeness and infinity. The writer also proves that he can perfectly use the Gdańsk hill scenery to keep creating new meanings. This is the case in, among other works, *Panna Ferbelin* where the Pacholek Hill, synonymously called Karlsberg, is transformed into the biblical Golgotha, which results in reflection on life and death, the meaning in pain and the mystery of salvation. Thus, the figures of sublimity that are present in the city space allow the writer to direct the reader's attention to big questions that are incessantly asked by man.

The spatial areas of sublimity play an important role in shaping the myth of the city. The researcher stresses that by referring to the said buildings, Chwin does not only want to uplift his place of residence in his novels. As each of those motifs is connected with the main characters' experiences, specifies their feelings, mostly at very difficult moments of their life, and renders the danger of the moment or the struggle with the fate. It is those places that give us a different look and allow us to explore the experiences of life and to examine our own existence. These are the vantage points, from which we can admire the boundless landscape and contemplate in solitude the mysteries of the world; these are the safe places, from which we can watch what escapes our cognitive capabilities.

In Chapter Four, the author studies the figures, the sublimity of which gains an apocalyptic shadow. Such figures are densely spread over Chwin's novels and often become part of the issues of existence and its end, raised by the writer. The apocalyptic sublimity is considered in this study as a meeting of the subject with something appalling and life-threatening. The sublimity lends an atmosphere of decadence to the Gdańsk writer's works and teaches that the world is fragile and decayable.

One of the apocalypse figures is World War II that suddenly changes human fates. The author shows this, drawing on the example of the novel *Death in Danzig*. The apocalyptic sublimity is not so much associated with the mere extermination but rather with the alarming premonition of an inevitable end, which is proved by the author in her analysis of excerpts from the novel *Esther*. In that novel, there appear apocalyptic figures, including an allusive reference to the *Book of Revelation*, mentions on disasters and assassinations and a

description of a mysterious phenomenon over the dome of St. Barbara Church. These elements determine the nature of time for the particular events and the whole novel as well as the kind of the characters' experiences.

Among the figures, in which the sublimity gains the tinge of apocalypse, the author also counts the ekphrases of Hans Memling's *Last Judgement*. This Dutch painter's triptych, which is now part of the collections held by the National Museum of Gdańsk, appears in Chwin's works several times and not only reflects the artistic fascination of the writer but also excites the readers' admiration and fills them with horror, inducing them to lose themselves in eschatological meditations. *The Last Judgement* by Michelangelo is another of the pictorial ideas of apocalypse analysed in the dissertation. The Italian painter's fresco is referred to in order to emphasize the excellence of God's act of creation, however, it also involves reflection on the division of the world after World War II. The other figures of apocalyptic sublimity include the World Trade Center towers that appear in the novel *Żona prezydenta* [The President's Wife]. The presence of this figure reflects in turn the present time condition and testifies to the new threats of civilization.

The look on Chwin's creative output through the figures of sublimity allows the author of the study to reach what fundamentally constitutes the poetics of the Gdańsk writer. Because sublimity contains an appealing kind of aesthetic tension that leads to the limits of cognitive power, to an intense multidimensional experience of existence, to what is silent and closed in inexpressibility as well as to what contains the eternal mysteries of the world and man That particular kind of reality modelling appears to the reader as a meaningful indication of Chwin's novels.