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**Vránková, Kamila. Metamorphoses of the sublime: From Ballads and Gothic Novels to Contemporary Anglo-American Children's Literature.**

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In her book, Kamila Vránková provides an ample description of how the notion of the sublime has transformed through the various eras while retaining its characteristics as a transgressive category one finds in several fields of the arts, let them be narrative (literature), visual (the fine arts), or theoretical (philosophy) in their nature. The volume reconstructs the narrative of the term “from scratch,” first offering a definition of the sublime as an aesthetic category, then providing the historical framework necessary to understand the various associations and connotations the notion of the sublime evokes. In this dense narrative of how the sublime evolved from the Antiquity (Longinus) through the 18<sup>th</sup> (Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant) and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau), and how it has been elaborated on by some of the greatest thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, British, continental and American aesthetes and philosophers included, the author also mentions literary texts that were produced in the respective periods, as if to prove the transgressive nature of the sublime. Then, the close reading of literary texts of a great diversity follows.

The interrelatedness of philosophy and literature already present in the theoretical chapter is further exemplified in the chapters to follow, as in these analyses Vránková heavily relies on the philosophy and the aesthetics of the sublime, combining ideas and phenomena introduced by thinkers as diverse as Immanuel Kant, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida, among others, to demonstrate the manifold ways the sublime manifests in the works discussed. Furthermore, she employs references to analytical and continental philosophies alike while analyzing literary works of great diversity: works of American and of British authors written in various eras and texts addressing adults and children are also included, representing various genres. Accordingly, in these chapters, the author proves that the sublime appears in and is connected to several fields (6). Therefore, one can say that the volume definitely represents more than “a brief draft of the possibilities of interpretation” (9), as it is able to inspire readers to seek new ways of understanding and interpreting the motif of sublimity both in theory and in literature.

In the first in-depth literary analysis provided, Vránková draws on more and less well-known ballads of the European literary heritage to illustrate how the rites-of-passage theory introduced by Arnold van Gennep can be used while analyzing “one specific type of the revenant tradition, the demon-lover ballad” (7). As she points out, the destruction represented by the character of the revenant is closely connected to the subversive (and also transgressive) power of the sublime, that is, to the lover’s “ambiguous desire to reach unity with the other and remain separated [...] at the same time” (49). Drawing on examples from Bulgarian, Albanian, Slovakian, as well as English literature, the author provides a detailed overview of the sub-genre from the Medieval until the Romantic period, arguing that the sublime nature of the rites of passage present in these works can be best described as “a disturbing and self-threatening transition towards a better understanding of one’s position in the universe” (53).

Disturbing features are not uncommon in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* either, which forms the central theme of the next chapter and concerning which Vránková focuses on "the Gothic sublime and the tradition of haunting and persecution in the image of the monster" (7). In this analysis, yet another feature of the sublime takes center stage: that "of otherness and the split self" (7). Yet again, the author calls into action several philosophies (and philosophers) while providing a Gothic sublime-based interpretation of the Romantic text: after mentioning several possible (literary) origins as for the image of the Monster, she connects Fred Botting's idea of the Monster as the manifestation of the inarticulate in literature to more character (counter-)development-based analyses of both *Frankenstein's* and the Monster's figures. Furthermore, calling the Monster "a symbol of modern science," (60) she introduces an impressive list of those literary and cinematic works for which Shelley's text (might have) worked as a literary predecessor, thus finding intertextual references to this technological aspect of monstrosity in works as diverse as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. She concludes her analysis with pointing out the uniqueness of Shelley's novel in the sense that it introduces "the ethical concept of the sublime as a recognition of the individual boundaries" (61).

Conversely, the next chapter reflects on the ambiguous nature of the sublime by providing a detailed examination of yet another iconic text of 19<sup>th</sup>-century English literature, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Here, Vránková aims "to develop the analysis of monstrosity and otherness with respect to [the] idea of the Romantic sublime as a loss of unity in the relationship between the subject and the object" (7). As for this version of the sublime, the author finds its essence "in the feeling of uncertainty, which surrounds all events and permeates the [...] utterances of both the narrators and the protagonists" (62) while employing theories of Edmund Burke and Tzvetan Todorov to prove that in this text, both the natural background of the landscape (let it be imaginary or real) and the notions of "time and space are experienced as dreamy and boundless" (68) and thus, ambiguous.

Turning her attention to "the American Gothic tradition" (8) and focusing on the interconnection that exists between the "American Puritan experience," (8) the Romantic imagination and mythological references, in the next chapter, Vránková provides an insightful analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's works written both for children and for adults: a compilation of imaginative retellings of various Greek myths, *Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys*, its sequel, *Tanglewood Tales*, and the novel entitled *The Marble Faun*. As the author points out, in these texts "mythical patterns are employed to dramatize the characters' inner conflicts as life-transforming, initiation experiences" (73), and she uses both Gennep's interpretation of the rites of passage and Burke's theory of the sublime to explain how Hawthorne's narratives turn one's "attention to the uncertainty of the human position in the incomprehensible world permeated with hostile and destructive forces"

(74). Therefore, with focusing on the transgressive element always already present in the notion of the sublime, she effectively argues that in these works, “the Gothic sublime permeates through the traditional rites-of-passage plots [...] at the point when transition transforms into transgression” (93).

The next chapter is unique in the sense that it provides a comparative analysis of yet another iconic Brontë text: this time of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which is discussed parallel with its “prequel,” Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Here, Vránková discusses various interpretations of otherness present in the novels, while also comparing the attitude of “Victorian and modernist literature” (8) to this concept. In examining Rhys's narrative, the author points out that this “story of alienation is centred on two crucial metaphors: the sea and the island” (95). Therefore, it seems natural to use Paul de Man's theory about “the importance of metaphors” (94), which the author employs effectively to prove that it is through these powerful metaphors that Rhys's text is able “to revive the disturbing potential of particular themes and motifs” (94) present in its 19<sup>th</sup>-century antecedent. As one of these themes is, obviously, otherness, the author's analysis concludes with the well-articulated argument that although “the experience of the sublime” might lead “to monstrosity” (as in *Jane Eyre*), but, on a more optimistic note, “also to the recognition of otherness as an inseparable part of individual identity” (8), as Rhys's narrative aptly demonstrates.

Further analyses of the other and otherness follow in the last four chapters of the book, which seem to divert from the previous chapters in the sense that their thematic focus lies “in children's literature” (8) or, to be more specific, in “the role of the sublime in Anglo-American fantasy fiction for young readers” (8). However, this diversion proves to be superficial not only in the sense that these analyses are supported by the extensive use of a similarly complex web of theoretical texts, but also because contemporary fantasy fiction is (at least) as much rooted in the Gothic tradition as the classics discussed in the first part of the volume are. This common origin becomes evident already in the analysis of Gothic features, such as “imagination, otherness and fear” (8–9) present in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century representatives of children's literature, which is then followed by the investigation of “the time-travel motif” (9). The last two chapters similarly have a thematic focus: after an inquiry into “the theme of the passage in [...] secondary, other worlds,” (9) the volume concludes with the analysis of “Gothic motifs in the stories of [...] contemporary Anglo-American authors,” (9) discussing “the experience of otherness, the loss of identity and the possibility of renewal” (9) in these works.

Taking into consideration the impressive number of theoretical interpretations and the great cultural, generic, and thematic variety of the literary texts covered, one finds that the author's aim of attempting “to further theoretical discussion by suggesting various possibilities of the employment of the sublime” (6) is definitely achieved. The only

shortcoming of the text (if any) might be that despite its accessible but scholarly language, one still finds occasional lapses in terms of grammatical accuracy (for instance the overuse of the definite article), which mistakes could easily have been avoided by a more meticulous editing work. This minute thing not considered, the work aptly fulfils its role in becoming a point of reference both for established scholars and those having a non-scholarly interest in the dynamic transitions of the sublime experience.