

ФІЛОСОФІЯ XIX СТОЛІТТЯ

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JAN ŚNIADECKI'S PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONCEPTS EXPLAINING BEAUTY AND ART

Introduction

Polish and Lithuanian historians of philosophy have carried out an in-depth analysis of the ideas pertinent to epistemology and science methodology by Jan Śniadecki, a prominent astronomer and mathematician of the beginning of the 19th century and a rector of the Imperial University of Vilnius. Śniadecki is also known to historians of Polish literature, whereas numerous histories of it touch upon his attitude toward classical and romantic literature, meanwhile historians of Polish aesthetics just mention Śniadecki's thought¹ but, as far as we have found out, do not explore it deeper². According to Dalius Viliūnas, an expert in history of the Lithuanian philosophy of the beginning of the 19th century, "the aesthetics of Jan Śniadecki is, in general, ignored by many researchers" [Viliūnas 2014: 191]. But, as a matter of fact, this gap in the history of philosophy of our region has been started to be filled in the last decade: concise descriptions of Śniadecki's classicist viewpoints were published [Plečkaitis 2007: 16; Plečkaitis 2008: 182-184; Viliūnas 2010: 562-563; Viliūnas 2014: 186-191], in a monograph "Lietuvos estetikos istorija: Apšvietos epocha" (*History of the Lithuanian Aesthetics: Period of Enlightenment*), it has been noted that he was the major proponent of academism in Vilnius who "represented the Warsawian line of academism" [Vaitkūnas 2011: 147], and it is mentioned several times that he had influence upon the aesthetic viewpoints of professors of the Faculty of Literature and Liberal Arts at Vilnius University. In continuation of the analysis of the thoughts of professors of other faculties of Vilnius University regarding philosophies of beauty and art, which were previously started in the publication about Anioł Dowgird [Vabalaite 2018], we will study in more detail Śniadecki's aesthetic thought that the above-mentioned researchers view as a significant factor in the formation of the views in the academic milieu of Vilnius. Lithuanian researchers, as well as already mentioned Polish ones, have analysed a polemic article by Śniadecki "O pismach klasycznych i romantycznych" (1819) (*On Classical and Romantic Writings*) [Plečkaitis 2008: 182-183; Viliūnas 2014: 189-191]; therefore, we will

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¹ Śniadecki's concept of "classical": [Tatarkiewicz 1975: 208, 210, 212]; his attitude toward classical and romantic literature: [Morawski 1961: 159]; his neo-classical views: [Morawski 1957: 235].

² As far as we have found out, the only description of his concept of beauty was given in Mirosława Chamcówna's monograph "Jan Śniadecki" [Chamcówna 1963: 99-100].

focus our attention on the philosopher's statements in the articles "O logice i retoryce" (1818) (*On Logics and Rhetoric*) and "O Literaturze" (1818) (*On Literature*) as well as his work "Filozofia umysłu ludzkiego, czyli rozważny wywód sił i działań umysłowych" (1821) (*Philosophy of Human Mind, or a Comprehensive Study of Intellectual Powers and Actions*).

It has to be admitted though that the fundamental premises of Śniadecki are not original: in his explication of what plays should be like he concisely replicates Aristotelian ideas; by acknowledging Shakespeare's genius but also criticising him for not being educated, he echoes the opinion that was prevalent in the beginning of the 18th century that, alongside the genius's greatness and naturalness, there is "something nobly wild and extravagant" in him, as a famous publisher of "The Spectator" and writer Joseph Addison (1672-1719) put it [Addison 1891a]. We cannot disagree with Ignacy Chrzanowski's opinion, that Śniadecki's classicistic attitudes are rooted in French literature and aesthetics [Chrzanowski 2003: 381], but simultaneously we see some analogies between Śniadecki's aesthetic ideas and the ones raised by the philosophers of Scottish school of common sense³. However, if we look deeper at our philosopher's understanding of particular aesthetic categories and interpretations of their relations, we are faced with his rather original thoughts. Śniadecki writes about beauty and art using the concepts of taste, imagination, genius, style and wit⁴ that were common at that time.

1. Concepts of taste and style

Our author defines taste similarly to Thomas Reid, a philosopher of the Scottish *common sense* school that had a huge influence on Śniadecki's epistemology; Thomas Reid viewed taste as "internal power of the mind; by which we perceive what is beautiful and what is deformed or defective in the various objects that we contemplate" [Reid 1852: 490]. Śniadecki also attributes taste to powers of the mind and believes that it is the ability "to differentiate beauty of nature and beauty of art works from ugliness" [Śniadecki 1822: 403]. Our philosopher acknowledges that people view as beautiful those things that cause pleasure and that they like but he also stresses that the power to cause sensory pleasure is not sufficient as a beauty criterion. Sensory impressions of liking and pleasure are conditioned by multiple circumstances of place and time, they change and are experienced by different people because of different things. Though not mentioning Plato, Śniadecki maintains that real beauty must have constant universal features and must be liked everywhere and always. Since mind, and not feeling, can be the source of constant and universal rules, taste must function alongside mind. An uncultivated taste that has not undergone the critique of common sense might like the things that have been dictated by "seeking of insufficiently comprehended and hurried novelty, authority of prominent people" [ibid.: 406] or by something that lacks simplicity resulting from successfully overcome difficulties. Just like another famous representative of the above-mentioned *common sense* school, Dugald Stewart⁵, who is, by the way, often quoted by our author in his works, he

³ Our study of these analogies might be conceived as an attempt of a response to Stefan Morawski's note: "an influence of 18th century English aesthetics on Polish thought in 1815-1830 requires study, which, as it seems, would be extremely fruitful" [Morawski 1961: 50]. We are particularly intrigued by the fact that further, in support of this idea, Morawski mentions the dependence of Śniadecki's thought about Shakespeare on Samuel Johnson.

⁴ It is noteworthy mentioning that wit was made especially significant in Baroque aesthetics, not Classicism aesthetics.

⁵ In the second part of "Philosophical Essays", devoted to the problems of aesthetics, Stewart states that correctness has "for its province the detection of blemishes", delicacy – "the perception of those more refined beauties which cultivated minds alone can feel" [Stewart 1816: 492-493].

notes that taste needs regularity and subtlety, “i. e. the ability to notice the beauties hidden from common sight and intellect, also to discern slight vices and defects and to avoid them” [ibid.: 407]. Taste rules can help avoid defects; thus, in seeking perfection of taste, it is necessary to get to know them. Alongside that, our author warns that those who are not endowed with taste by birth cannot develop taste by knowing the rules; therefore, he views taste as an innate⁶ ability that is dependent on sense and mind but he does not explain that in more detail.

In an analogous vein, Śniadecki thinks about the style of linguistic expression. In his article “On Logics and Rhetoric”, he maintains that “after deeper consideration, I see all the rules of aesthetics that were borrowed from the fine arts as distant, unsubstantiated and merely empty metaphysics that is not suitable for anything in writing” [Śniadecki 1837: 125], and thus he differentiates the rules of creation of fine arts from those rules that are either consciously or unconsciously followed by great writers. Appropriate style of writing, in the philosopher’s opinion, is formed through deep analysis of one’s own senses and senses of other people. Our author thinks senses are simple, just like uncomplicated images; therefore, he states that they are not even worthwhile decomposing. The theories that analyse style and seek to decompose it into separate elements, according to the philosopher, do not explain it but rather make it confused, dull or even destroy it completely. Subtleties of style are supposedly easier felt than understood. Śniadecki substantiates his opinion by referring to the statement of Blaise Pascal that “style dies where mind starts to analyse it” [ibid.: 126], thus specifically acknowledging the existence of the insightful human soul, not only mathematical. Of course, a writer needs to know excellently the described thing as this knowledge allows expressing ideas exactly, clearly and simply; however, according to our author, thinking alone is insufficient for elaboration of beautiful ideas: it has to be inspired by feelings. Good style is characterised by original language, power, splendidence and revelation of the flow of passions.

2. Concepts of talent and imagination

In his analysis of higher and complex abilities of intellect, our philosopher notes that one of the important abilities of a writer is wit, or the ability of the creative power of mind to see the previously unnoticed side of things, quickly establish relations among concepts, show the reader the novelty noticed in the known phenomena and to captivate the reader’s attention. Śniadecki differentiates between that what is witty and that what is majestic and beautiful, seeing wit as merriment of soul that seeks neither to raise one higher nor fill one with enjoyment, its “consequence is universal attraction and pleasure” [Śniadecki 1822: 383]. The philosopher acknowledges that wit aligned with modes of imagination and serious mind can be even more impactful on readers’ viewpoints than strong and elaborate argumentation.

In his article “On Literature“, the author views the exceptional impactfulness of the literary art as an expression of the highest power of the writer’s talent that, even when not abiding by the rules, sometimes emerges so strong that it even turns over the whole metaphysical theory. Unfortunately, it is impossible to foresee or to describe how the writer’s talent will act. Śniadecki often employs the concept of talent, just like other concepts such as exceptional abilities or genius, that are not explained in more detail, when he analyses deeper the specificities of the literary art, and, in his analysis of fine arts, he stresses more the rules for using tools of artistic expression as well as application of findings of optical

⁶ Śniadecki’s interpretation of aspects of innate and cultivated taste is also close to the one presented in the already cited part of “Philosophical Essays” [Stewart (1816): 503-505].

sciences in artistic creation; thus maybe this complexity of literary art leads our philosopher towards the viewpoint that, alongside grammar, rhetoric, aesthetics, dialectics, hermeneutics, literature (literary science in today's terms) should be listed as a separate branch of science. Following French and English examples, this science should study the subtle feeling of beauty that serves as grounds for assessing real poetry and fictional prose. To this branch of science, Śniadecki attributes "exemplary writings" (*pisma wzorowe*), which "do not allow us to make it clear what the sources of that indeed unknown [creative] power and activity are" [Śniadecki 1837: 84]. The status of "exemplary writings" is granted to them by the genius who guides the writer's thoughts and accompanies the writer's pen, and, hence, the wonderful magic of language, taste and thought in created texts.

Our philosopher thinks about the relationship between genius and rules in a similar vein as Kant⁷. In Śniadecki's opinion, one can discern the rules of order, power and beauty in the works of exemplary writers but these works are not created by following them. In the author's own words, "we see how genius does not break rules that he has never heard of, he is inspired by them through truth itself; how he establishes the ones that have never been known before; how diversely and pleasantly he presents colours and shapes to our thoughts and knowledge; how, in depictions of things, without seeking it, he leaves traces of his character, intellect and education" [ibid.: 86].

Differently from Kant, though, our thinker is striving to substantiate comprehensively the objectivist conception of truth. He regards proportions, order, regularity of perspective, colour, light and shadow as the principles of beauty in imitative arts. The philosopher acknowledges that criteria of beauty are unknown in other arts; their beauty is felt but unexplainable. Conversely, he believes that this hidden *je ne sais quoi* element, in terms of those times, is unexplainable only for the time being but it is not essentially irrational, and he tries to predict what may be acknowledged as universal beauty in the future. Our author thus deliberates on beauty in the section on beauty in „Philosophy of Human Mind“: "Maybe time will come when the features of beauty in all creative arts will merge and will lead to the same simple and scarce but universal truths and principles; maybe beauty will be a need, commodity, use, purpose and project, or all at once, a way towards real pleasure and elegance, satisfied, thought over and aligned with settings of mind" [Śniadecki 1822: 405].

Of course, the philosopher admits that the mind on its own is just a judge of beauty, not its creative power, and he thinks that the creative ability lies in imagination. It is noteworthy that, differently from theoreticians of the Scottish *common sense* school, Śniadecki separates imagination from fancy. Admittedly, through this separation, he replicates "an older tradition with roots in classical and medieval thought that assigned roles to the faculties on the basis of etymology: fancy being associated with the Greek *phantasia* – from *phantazein*, "causing to appear" – was awarded the power of creativity, while imagination from the Latin *imaginatio* was given the more concrete task of copying percepts in the shape of *images*" [Costelloe 2013: 195]. Śniadecki views fancy as power that takes hold of intellect due to experienced strong impressions; an individual, undergoing the impact of this power does not realize that the images that overflow him are merely his imagination. Imagination, as he puts it, is "the power of soul that allots to all concepts a strong sensory guise, it is intellectual paint-

⁷ The author of "Critique of Judgement" states that "fine art cannot itself devise the rule by which it is to bring about its product" and „they do not themselves arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge" [Kant 1987: 175].

ing” [Śniadecki 1822: 452]. The sensory “guise” can be understood as an expression of mental things through compositions of concepts experienced through senses. Due to senses, abstractions, words and their meanings, memory, insights into relationships, and associations, imagination allows conveying thoughts by the use of metaphors, comparisons, personalisation and other impactful means of indirect expression. The philosopher agrees that an artist’s imagination can overstep the limits of understanding because images perceived through senses and created in imagination do not need to persuade but rather they have to draw attention, “excite, be liked, bring joy and surprise” [ibid.: 430]. Of course, as a proponent of ideas of the Enlightenment, our author stresses that creation of illusions is merely a tool for expressing didactic ideas in a lively, attractive and not boring form.

We have mentioned several times earlier that Śniadecki describes the factors that determine the value of literary arts and imitative fine arts (or, as he puts it, inventive arts) in different ways. He believes that merely nice sound, fascinating language and harmony are insufficient for a good literary piece. All intellectual abilities of a writer have to help his imagination. However, our philosopher does not impose such strict requirements upon the imagination of a creator of the imitative fine arts; he believes that this imagination “is sometimes allowed to follow the inspiration of fancy and to overstep the limits of credibility” [ibid.: 449].

Like other already cited authors – Addison⁸ and Stewart⁹ – Śniadecki also admits that an artist does not have to imitate reality; an artist, just like a composer or an architect, achieves most in depicting new idealised reality. People endowed with imagination and taste make up “a different world of strangeness and illusions, they associate and link those creatures of the new world, transfer them and relate them with real world phenomena in order to inspire life, freshness and diversity into their thoughts” [ibid.: 429]. Namely these abilities, in his opinion, compose the mysterious power of genius.

Conclusions

The conclusion of researchers of the history of philosophy that Śniadecki was a proponent of Classicism can be supplemented by the statement that his aesthetic viewpoint was grounded in his more general philosophical convictions that were influenced by the ideas of the Scottish *common sense* school. Just like the theoretician of this school, Dugald Stewart, our author develops the aesthetics that should be attributed to pre-Romanticist period. Though presenting such an interpretation of genius that resembles that of Kant, Śniadecki tries to substantiate objectivist aesthetics and rationally explain the principles of beauty and art. Conversely, due to *common sense*, not being able to ignore the fact that the existing reality does not provide material for solving the secrets of the nature of geniality, essence of beauty and other artistic creation, he expresses the hope characteristic of the entire Enlightenment that the progress of mind will sometime allow to provide answers to these mysterious questions based on rational arguments.

⁸ In entry no. 419 he maintains that imagination “has not only the whole Circle of Nature for its Province, but makes new Worlds of its own, shews us Persons who are not to be found in Being” [Addison 1891b].

⁹ According to this philosopher, “imagination, by her power of selection and of combination, can render her productions more perfect than are those which are exhibited in the natural world [...] collects into a single ideal object the charms that are scattered among a multitude of realities” [Stewart 1816: 361].

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Jan Śniadecki's Philosophical Interpretations of the Concepts Explaining Beauty and Art

Analysing Śniadecki's articles and chapters from his "Philosophy of Human Mind" dealing with the problems of aesthetic taste, style, wit, imagination and essence of beauty, we question a view of Śniadecki as a dogmatic proponent of Classicism and an enemy to Romanticism, which, in our view, is based on in-depth studies of his most famous nevertheless only one article "On Classical and Romantic Writings". We suppose that French aesthetics is not the exclusive

keystone of Śniadecki's ideas. Therefore, we examine the peculiarities of his thought in the context of their relationship with the ideas by philosophers of the Scottish school of common sense and argue that these are close. His descriptions of taste and style, of the roles of imagination and sensory expressions are similar to Reid's and Stewart's ones. We show that Śniadecki strives to substantiate the objectivist view of aesthetics and rationally explain the essence of beauty and art, but, by surprise, his thought about the relationship between genius and rules is recalling Kantian view. Our conclusion is that Sniadecki's ideas might be attributed to at least neo-Classical, or even to pre-Romanticist period.

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Ян Снядецький і його філософські тлумачення понять, що пояснюють красу й мистецтво

Аналізуючи статті та глави з «Філософії людського розуму» Яна Снядецького, що стосуються проблем естетичного смаку, стилю, кмітливості, яви й сутності краси, ми ставимо під сумнів погляд на Снядецького як на догматичного прихильника класицизму й ворога романтизму. Цей погляд, на нашу думку, ґрунтується на поглиблених дослідженнях його найвідомішої, однак лише однієї статті «Про класичні й романтичні твори». Ми припускаємо, що французька естетика не є винятковою основою ідей Снядецького. Тому ми розглядаємо особливості його думки через зв'язок останньої з ідеями філософів шотландської школи здорового глузду і стверджуємо, що тут існує близький зв'язок. Описи смаку і стилю, ролей яви й чуттєвих виразів у Снядецького схожі на описи Рейда і Стюарта. Ми показуємо, що Снядецький прагне обґрунтувати об'єктивістський погляд на естетику й раціонально пояснити суть краси й мистецтва, але його думка про зв'язок генія і правил несподівано нагадує Кантів погляд. Ми висновуємо, що ідеї Снядецького можна віднести принаймні до неокласичного, якщо не до доромантичного періоду.

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