

## PERSONIFICATION AND GENIZATION. COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH SYMBOLIST LITERATURE

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*Abstract: The way in which man chooses to translate reality into figurative language, by way of metaphors, is not only a source of aesthetic pleasure but also a mirror of individual or collective psychology. As a way of transferring the real into the figurative, personification, defined as transferring a non-human amount into the form of a conscious human person, capable of thought and language, possessed of a face and voice, facilitates understanding of the mysterious aspects of existence, while at the same time making literary texts more lively, more alert, possibly more accessible and certainly more pleasing to the reader. But many times personification is difficult to separate from its by-product, namely the process of genderisation. In languages in which it exists, the category of gender has a significant impact on individual perception and expression. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the relationship between grammatical and imaginary gender, by way of personification, while limiting itself to an analysis of symbolist poetry, represented by the works of three Romanian and three English language poets. Only personifications clearly associated to gender characteristics will be taken into consideration.*

*Keywords: linguistic relativity, bilingualism, grammatical gender*

### 1. Personification and metaphor

An analysis or personification cannot be performed in the absence of certain considerations regarding the metaphor, in whose vast category the former can be found. Creating images, symbols, metaphors in order to understand certain aspects of reality which are more difficult to conceptualise is a specifically human attribute. For this reason, the metaphor as a linguistic, rhetorical, psychological or social reality has been closely studied for centuries. Defined as a transfer of meaning by way of which an image-word replaces the object-word<sup>1</sup>, the metaphor is appreciated as being the most refined form of artistic language.

The way in which humans choose to translate reality into a figurative language by way of metaphors is not only a source of aesthetic pleasure but also a mirror into individual or collective psychology. The concept of conceptual metaphor has been discussed often in the last decade, considered to be the bridge between linguistics and literature. Researchers involved in analysing conceptual (also known as cognitive) metaphors postulate that metaphors are not a tool of language, but one of thought. Thus, a conceptual metaphor can be understood as the vast field of man's symbolic relationship to the outside world, a relationship expressed in the sub-field of arts by metaphors as tropes. Metaphors project structures from the source-fields of human experience into abstract target-fields. This allows the reader to conceive, for instance, the abstract idea of life as a journey or a river.

Illustrating abstract ideas or concepts, personification facilitates the understanding of the more mysterious aspects of existence, while also making literary texts livelier, more alert, possibly more accessible and certainly more pleasant to the reader. Besides its cognitive-functional aspect, metaphors and implicitly personifications are a measure of artistic mastery, eloquence and linguistic creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> Irina Petraş, *Teoria literaturii*, Biblioteca Apostrof, Cluj Napoca, 2002, p. 101

## 2. Personification and genderisation

The concept of genderisation, largely treated in Romanian literature by Irina Petraş<sup>2</sup>, underlines the existence of a certain strong connection between the process of personification and gender, both natural and grammatical. Many times, an inanimate object, once it receives human features, also receives characteristics belonging to one of the sexes, thus behaving accordingly in the text.

Although it is not an unusual feature of world languages, gender is not an essential attribute; many languages don't have gender systems, a fact which does not have disastrous consequences on its speakers' eloquence. Thus, in Anne Curzan's opinion, gender might be perceived as a secondary, unessential grammatical category, as it does not have what could be seen as an authentic relationship to conceptual categories<sup>3</sup>. But, in the languages in which it exists, this category has a significant impact on individual perception and expression.

There are languages in which, although the category of gender is not grammatically expressed within the noun, gender distinctions occur in the pronoun. Such is the case of English, which, besides the masculine and feminine, has "it" to name objects or animals, thus creating a category of neuters which, in Irina Petraş' opinion, is more credible than what is usually called neuter in Romanian, as "Romanian does not have a neuter, but rather an ambigenous; neuter nouns are not "neither-nor" but rather "both-and" <sup>4</sup>. For speakers of English, used to a linguistic universe in which "it" covers the entire range of asexual entities and unaware of the fact that Old English used to have the same three gender categories as Romanian, it may seem absurd to speak of such asexual entities in terms normally reserved for masculine or feminine human beings, or possibly for certain animals. But, through emotional closeness, a speaker of English always has the opportunity to pull a certain noun outside the range of "it" and into either the feminine or the masculine category.

The result of this is, both in Romanian and in English, a sexed perspective which brings humans closer to things, now approached in a more familiar manner, as they are identified with either the masculine or the feminine principle.

## 3. Personification, gender and linguistic relativity

The theory of linguistic relativity postulates that there is a very strong interdependence between the language or languages spoken by an individual on the one hand and his or her thinking patterns or world perception on the other hand. Forced to pay more attention to certain aspects of reality and less attention to others every time they communicate, speakers will eventually form thought patterns which will have subsequent consequences on memory, perception, associations and even practical abilities.<sup>5</sup>

Going back to grammatical gender, it is most often emphasised in an adjectival context, but this is done unconsciously, automatically, due to the habit of seeing the world a certain way, a habit for which the very grammatical structure of the language the speaker

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<sup>2</sup> Irina Petraş, *Teoria literaturii*, Biblioteca Apostrof, Cluj Napoca, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Anne Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p. 16

<sup>4</sup> Irina Petraş – *Limba stăpâna noastră. Încercare asupra feminităţii limbii române*, Editura Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, Cluj-Napoca, 1999, p. 69

<sup>5</sup> Guy Deutscher, *Through the language glass: why the world looks different in other languages*. New York. Metropolitan Books, 2010, p. 152

thinks in is largely “to blame”. In the case of languages which have the category of gender, it has a significant influence on imaginary gender features which speakers tend to attribute to inanimate nouns, in a grammatical gender system, noun classes do not correspond to conceptual categories. Nevertheless, in languages with two or three gender categories, usually named masculine, feminine and neuter, the speakers will inevitably establish an unconscious equivalence between grammatical gender and biological sex. This phenomenon is further supported by the fact that this correlation exists when it comes to nouns denominating human beings<sup>6</sup>.

This phenomenon can be objectively and quantifiably observed in the arts<sup>7</sup>. Artists do not create in a cultural vacuum; they have always been influenced in their allegorical topics by precedents found in history, mythology or cultural tradition, all of which shaped their personification-related choices. But, analysing European art, it is interesting to note that even when it comes to less frequent concepts, for which no historical precedent could be found (for instance geometry, necessity or quiet), a very strong correspondence between grammatical and imaginary gender is preserved.

But what happens in English, which has quite stable imaginary gender conventions without having a grammatical gender category? Intuitively, Irina Petraş considers gender classification in English to be a strict and motivated belief with sources which are anything but arbitrary and which could be traced back to time immemorial<sup>8</sup>. This “time immemorial” she speaks of is more rigorously identified by Anne Curzan as being the period of Old English, in which gender categories similar to those in Romanian existed. One can assume that a certain residual semantic gender classification exists in the consciousness of English speakers and can be seen reflected in art or in the conceptual metaphors of daily communication. These gender conventions must not be dismissed as arbitrary, as they might be explained by the gender categories which existed in Old English, as well as by the successive mutations which this category went through in the evolution of the language.

Thus, in both languages under analysis, the category of gender – even when it is hidden – is a fiction which functions as a reality and shapes one’s perspective. This paper will proceed to analyse to what extent poetic imagery is influenced by this minor but mighty grammatical category. It will investigate the relationship between grammatical and imaginary gender, by way of personification, limiting itself to Symbolist poetry, represented by the works of three Romanian and three English-language poets. Only personifications clearly associated to gender features will be taken into consideration. Also, concepts have been grouped according to their semantic function.

## 4. Frequently anthropomorphised concepts

### 4.1 Death

One of the most frequent themes of world literature in any era, death is an equally mysterious and recurrent concept. Conventionally, in the Anglo-American culture, death is represented in the form of a frightening male (“The Grim Reaper”). The same is true for

<sup>6</sup> Anne Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Edward Segel, Lera Boroditsky, *Grammar in Art*, in *Frontiers in Psychology* 1:244, 2011, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2010.00244, published online 13 Jan. 2011, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> Irina Petraş – *Feminitatea limbii române. Genosanalize*, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 64

German culture, in contrast with Romance or Slavic cultures, in which, in the crushing majority of cases, both in conventional thought and in art, death is represented as a woman: pretty or ugly, young or old, maternal, seductive or dangerous<sup>9</sup>. It is, of course, easy to guess that in the latter cultures, the noun “death” is grammatically feminine (la mort, la muerte, la morte, moartea etc).

Predictably, in Romanian literature, death appears in the shape of an ethereal but frightening woman: “*Ochii negri,/ Părul negru,/ Și-mbrăcată-n negru toată,*”<sup>10</sup>

But when it comes to the English Symbolists, the representations seem to be split. Defying the general male-death convention, the poets subject to our analysis depict death as a woman, as ethereal as the one imagined by Minulescu. For instance, in the poem *Laus Mortis*, which Arthur Symons wholly dedicated to death, it is seen as a maternal woman, with a warm and benevolent attitude, in stark contrast to the seductive but treacherous bride as metaphor of life: “*I bring to thee, for love, white roses, delicate Death! [...] Discreet and comforting Death! for those pale hands of thine;/ O hands that I have fled, soft hands now laid on mine,/ Softer than these white flowers of life, thy hands to me,/ Most comfortable Death, mother of many dreams,[...] I have been fearful of thee, mother, all life long,[...] I come back to thy arms, mother, and now all strife/ Ceases; and every homeward-flying dream, wind-tossed,/ My soul that looks upon thy face and understands,/ My throbbing heart that at thy touch is quieted,/ And all that once desired, and all desire now dead,/ Are gathered to the peace and twilight of thy hands*”<sup>11</sup>.

Death, spoken to directly and named with a capital letter, is “delicate”, “discrete and comforting”, and the touch of its soft and pallid hands is finally accepted with relief and humility, as a welcome alternative to life – the bitter bride loved passionately, but distant and impossible to control or keep. The appellative “mother” is used three times throughout the poem.

Yeats seems to have a similar view of death, which he presents as having a delicate form and a sweet name, features which can be interpreted as feminine (-- *It had such dignity of limb --/By the sweet name of Death*).<sup>12</sup>

It is possible for these feminine representations to be due both to the influence of the French language, which historically had a strong shaping impact on English and to the influence of the French literary imagery upon the English, considering that the English Symbolist poets massively borrowed, translated and adapted French Symbolist creations, their original contribution being rather limited with regard to this literary trend.

But the same Yeats, in the poem *John Kinsella's Lament For Mrs. Mary Moore*, uses the masculine personal pronoun to refer to death as a seductive but merciless lover, who could have had any of the feminine presences in the poet's entourage, but was satisfied by none other than the most treasured of them all, Mary Moore: “*He might have had my sister,/ My*

<sup>9</sup> Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1999, p. 7

<sup>10</sup> Ion Minulescu, *Celei din urmă*, în *Nu sunt ce par a fi*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998, p. 105

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Symons – *Laus Mortis*, in *The Complete Works. Volume 2*, Secker, London, 1924, p. 83

<sup>12</sup> W.B. Yeats, *His Dream*, in *Poems. The Originals*, Hayes Barton Press, 1964, p. 194

*cousins by the score,/ But nothing satisfied the fool/ But my dear Mary Moore,*”<sup>13</sup> Here, death manifests masculine behaviour and attitude.

Leaving aside the feminising exceptions, the vast majority of the masculine representations of death in the Anglophone culture is most likely not due to a random and sterile convention, but rather traces its roots back the masculine grammatical gender of the noun *dēap* (death) in Old English.

#### 4.2. The moon and the sun

Another frequent motive, the moon, often occurs in conjunction or in opposition to the sun. The metaphor of the sun as a dragon (i.e. strong, imposing, fierce, ultimately masculine) occurs almost identically in a poem by Macedonski and one by Oscar Wilde. We can compare: “*În Kars, sub cer cu fund de aur,/ Pe când e soarele-n apus/ Încolăcit ca un balaur/ Pe după deal aproape dus*”<sup>14</sup>; with: “*the sun,/ Like a great dragon, writhes in gold*”<sup>15</sup>.

The representations of the moon by English Symbolists seem to coincide with those imagined by the Romanians, the general consensus being that the moon has rather feminine features. However, which the English Symbolists see it in welcoming, warm postures, as mother or lover, the Romanian Symbolists generally represent a cold, distant, cruel entity. Macedonski’s blind soul has eyes which are “cold, colder than the moon” and Bacovia sees the “pale, barren moon standing sadly behind a tree”<sup>16</sup>

Symons’ moon is equally pale: “*The pale moon shining from a pallid sky/ Lit half the street, and over half she laid/ Her folded mantle,*”<sup>17</sup>

A representation of the moon closer to the imagery of most English Symbolists occurs in Macedonski’s poem entitled *Lewki*, where it appears in the shape of a maiden engaging in a befitting activity (wool spinning) and content with its possible status of bride: “*Lună! fin e însă tortul de pe fusul tău de aur/ Si divin e sentimentul ce măriți cu valul roz*”<sup>18</sup>.

Such maidenly representations of the moon occur quite often in the verses of the English Symbolists. For instance, in *Lotus Leaves*, Wilde sees the moon as “an orbéd maiden”.<sup>19</sup> In another poem by Wilde, the maiden-moon retreats to her sombre cave, wrapped in a thin veil: “*And suddenly the moon withdraws/ Her sickle from the lightening skies,/ And to her sombre cavern flies/ Wrapped in a veil of yellow gauze.*”<sup>20</sup>

As was to be expected in the interactions between a poet and the moon, the poetic ego’s strictly contemplative attitude turns into an admiring stance as the distant and cold maiden is venerated like a queen and subsequently becomes a lover and a mother. Wilde’s invocation in *Endymion* – “O rising moon! O Lady moon!” – is not left without a response from the “Queen of the gardens of the sky”. Another Symbolist, Symons, confesses in *Alle*

<sup>13</sup> W.B. Yeats - John Kinsella's Lament For Mrs. Mary Moore, in *Poems. The Originals*, Hayes Barton Press, 1964, p. 213

<sup>14</sup> Alexandru Macedonski - *Acşam dovalar*, în *Excelsior. Poezii*, Editura Litera, Chişinău, 1998, p. 94

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Wilde- *Le panneau*, in *The Complete Works*. Harper Collins, New York, 1966, p. 842

<sup>16</sup> George Bacovia - *Crize*, în *Plumb - Poezii*, Editura Litera, Chişinău, 2001, p. 90

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Symons – *A Winter's Night*, in *The Complete Works. Volume I*, Secker, London, 1924, p. 84

<sup>18</sup> Alexandru Macedonski – *Lewki*, în *Excelsior. Poezii*, Editura Litera, Chişinău, 1998, p. 182

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Wilde – *Lotus Leaves*, in *The Complete Works*. Harper Collins, New York, 1966, p. 814

<sup>20</sup> Oscar Wilde - *Impressions II. La Fuite De La Lune*, in *The Complete Works*. Harper Collins, New York, 1966, p. 771



*Zattere* that above the daily camaraderie with the sun, he places his nightly play with the moon, now become a hesitant, shy but playful lover: "[...] *as for me/ I make the moon my mistress*"<sup>21</sup>

The next stage is inevitable and predictable. After Symons' "white moon" "nests among the waters", anticipating the state of motherhood, she becomes "heroic mother moon", finally losing herself in the madness caused by an excess of births (i.e. an excess of femininity) and wandering aimlessly in the sky: "*the white moon should make/ Her nest among its waters* [...]"<sup>22</sup> or "*heroic mother moon*"<sup>23</sup> or "*Crazed through much child-bearing/ The moon is staggering in the sky*;"<sup>24</sup>

These gradual states (maiden-lover-mother-madwoman) are as many facets of femininity, situations which are evoked in varied metaphors but drawing from the same semantic fund, in the entire world literature.

### 4.3. The seasons

Contrary to what an analysis of the Romantics has found, in the case of the Symbolists, the unanimous perception for poets of both ethnicities is that the seasons are not only feminine, but more specifically young girls. Spring, for example is "the bride of nature", a lass resting by a fountain or a fickle boarding school girl: "*Dear Bride of Nature and most bounteous Spring!*"<sup>25</sup> or "*Primăvara,/ O copilă poposită la fântână*"<sup>26</sup> or "*Primăvara/ A izbit cu pumnul-n geam/ Și-a fugit din pension/ De la "Notre-Dame de Sion"* or "*Primăvară, primăvară,/ Inutila mea fecioară*"<sup>27</sup>.

Compared to the virginal freshness of spring, summer appears as a woman with enticing shapes, prefiguring a more conspicuous femininity. Also, she appears in lazy, wilted states, anticipating the tiredness of autumn: "*Vara însă-i fata de la țară -/ Bleagă și prostuță ca o oaie -/ (...) / Iar pe mal, gardiștii - cască-gură -/ O mănâncă cu privirea lor șireată,/ Ca bătrânii poftitori de trup de fată*"<sup>28</sup>

Autumn is personified in the same feminine shape, but in two different states. On the one hand, she embodies plenty, richness and maturity, by the comely ornaments she wears or her rich locks, but on the other hand, the same maturity is manifested by depression, disease, death, as in the case of Minulescu's autumn "with a smoky look": "*The Autumn's gaudy livery whose gold Her jealous brother pilfers, but is true*"<sup>29</sup> or "*Sau toamna goală va dansa cu plete de grâu și de vin*"<sup>30</sup> or "*Palidă, toamna nervoasă, cântând a murit.../ Îmi cade vioara și cad ostenit,/ Iar*

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Symons – *Alle Zattere*, in *The Complete Works. Volume 1*, Secker, London, 1924, p.194

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Symons – *The Rapture*, in *The Complete Works. Volume 1*, Secker, London, 1924, p. 74

<sup>23</sup> W.B. Yeats – *Lines Written in Dejection*, in *Poems. The Originals*, Hayes Barton Press, 1964, p. 113

<sup>24</sup> W.B. Yeats – *The Crazed Moon*, in *Poems. The Originals*, Hayes Barton Press, 1964, p. 347

<sup>25</sup> Oscar Wilde – *Humanitad*, in *The Complete Works*. Harper Collins, New York, 1966, p. 791

<sup>26</sup> George Bacovia – *Note de primăvară*, în *Plumb - Poezii*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 2001, p. 76

<sup>27</sup> Ion Minulescu – *Primăvara inutilă*, în *Nu sunt ce par a fi*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998, p. 123

<sup>28</sup> Ion Minulescu – *Vara în capitală*, în *Nu sunt ce par a fi*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998, p. 124

<sup>29</sup> Oscar Wilde – *Humanitad*, in *The Complete Works*. Harper Collins, New York, 1966, p. 791

<sup>30</sup> George Bacovia – *Vae soli*, în *Plumb - Poezii*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 2001, p. 102

toamna, poetă, cântând a murit.<sup>31</sup>” or “Și femeia cu privirea fumurie/ A intrat suspectă și umilă/ Ca o mincinoasă profeție/ De Sibilă...<sup>32</sup>”.

Surprisingly, personified winter does not follow the predictable itinerary of degradation and death, but recovers some of the youth and freshness of spring, as she wears a white ball gown, as well as some of autumn’s maternal maturity: “M-am întâlnit cu Iarna la Predeal.../ Era-mbrăcată ca și-acum un an,/ Cu aceeași albă rochie de bal,(...)/ Ce mare ești,/ Ce bună ești,/Ce caldă ești!...<sup>33</sup>”

## 5. Conclusions

A preliminary research of abstract noun personifications, limited in this case to Symbolist poetry, reveals a series of conclusions, only a part of which were anticipated. Firstly, it is obvious that in all the cases cited from Romanian poetry, the gender characteristics of the personified concept are consistent with the grammatical gender in Romanian: death, the moon and the seasons are illustrated as feminine entities, whereas the sun as a masculine one. Surprisingly, in English poetry, gender representations largely coincide with the Romanian ones. This can be due either to the influence of the hidden, residual gender, or to the fact that the similarities between the two European cultures lead to certain equivalent semantic constructs within which, according to Irina Petraș, “generally, everything large, intense, violent is masculine, everything gentle, sweet, affectionate, fertile is feminine”<sup>34</sup>. In the latter case, imaginary gender assignment would no longer be related to the influence of a grammatical structure but to the attitude of the speakers, largely determined by the social concepts of sex and gender.<sup>35</sup> One can assume that such cultural similarities referring to sex, gender and gender roles can be found to be common to all European cultures.

In order to determine the real cause, a serious diachronic exploration of abstract nouns in Old English, as well as of the gender mutations throughout the development of the English language should be performed. The most efficient way to obtain results to this end is to analyse literary works from the point of view of anthropomorphism, following comparatively the personification and genderisation of certain general human concepts in the two literatures subject to our study.

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<sup>31</sup> George Bacovia - *Toamna murind*, în *Plumb - Poezii*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 2001, p. 189

<sup>32</sup> Ion Minulescu – *Cu toamna în odaie*, în *Nu sunt ce par a fi*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998, p. 126

<sup>33</sup> Ion Minulescu - *De vorbă cu iarna*, în *Nu sunt ce par a fi*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998, p. 127

<sup>34</sup> Irina Petraș – *Limba stăpâna noastră. Încercare asupra feminității limbii române*, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 1999, p. 64

<sup>35</sup> Anne Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p. 30

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