One theoretical synthesis approach of Romanian symbolist poetry – modernism dawn

Carmen Nicolescu a

aPitesti University, 01 Targu din vale, Pitesti 110040, Romania

Abstract

The investigation of the style in poetry try to rediscover and to redefine the expressive particularities and the originality of each literary work through a deep analysis on various stylistic levels, prosodic elements or figures of imagination within the metaphor and the epithet are the most important. The comparative-analytical investigation of a generation of poets aims to shape not only the general features, the similarities in the evolution of a literary movement, but also the differences selected from the literary works which from a both, thematic and stylistic point of view, belong to the general aesthetics of the literary movement. The Symbolism – a literary-artistic movement with European echoes, with reverberations in different fields of the cultural-artistic life at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century – means, first of all, an attitude which tries to overcome the complex of some already existing types of that time.

1. Introduction

The influence the writers and their literary work have on the evolution of the national language in the theme that has always been of profound interest since the oldest times up to the present. The interest in the rhetoric and the content of the literary works goes back to Platon and Aristotel and has developed in the course of time in an interesting and challenging way. The study of the style and means of expression cultivated by writers meets, starting with Charles Bally and I. Iordan (researchers who reconsidered the various resources of expression of the common language) an unprecedented progress.

The experts in the writers style try, through analysis at different stylistic levels, prosodic elements or figures of imagination (among which the metaphor and the epithet come first) to rediscover and redefine the expressive particularities and originality of each work in turn. By a comparative – analytical investigation of a generation of writers, they mean to outline the general traits, the common points in the evolution in the literary trend, but also the differences selected from the works which belong, in terms of theme and style, to the general aesthetics of the movement.
2. A general approach of the symbolist literary movement.

Symbolism, a literary-artistic movement in Europe, with influences on different domains of the cultural-artistic life at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, means, first of all, an attitude which tries to go beyond the complex of the patterns of the epoch. This literary trend, manifested mainly in the lyric poetry, with the experience of romanticism, whose rejection is its starting point, proposes a renewal of aesthetics and means of expression. The major focus is on the style, the figures of imagination, of the plasticity of language, by using specific stylistic devices to make a difference between the own writing and the works already written. Enjoying a simultaneous development in almost all the countries where there were writers ready to show interest in this movement, symbolism had the privilege to spread its aesthetics and inovative ideas at the same time, to popularise its works simultaneously, by reading them at literary circles and bohemian cafes (which were part of this attitude by all means) and by publishing them in the popular magazines of the time.

All these things led to significant changes in the language and in what the idea about the lyrical expression of the time meant.

2.1. Description of research sample.

Very often this literary movement was treated with an enthusiasm slightly exaggerated by part of the contemporaries and the literary critic, or with an unjustified scepticism and was called an imitation far from the Romanian spirit (G. Ibraileanu, I. Trivale, N. Iorga, Ilarie Chendi), lacking originality and full of artificiality. Both approaches tend to be unjust towards this turning point of the Romanian lyric poetry. By investigating the occurrence of the epithet we can point out the fact that the Romanian poets proved to have a balanced maturity and vision, building an individual stylistic universe deliberately, with avoiding exaggeration and escalation of limits.

The Romanian symbolism means, in the language of speciality, a literary attitude which expresses special, strange and somehow morbid and sick sensations evoked through melancholic-depressing musicality, sensual tonality, allusive representations obscure, imprecise images, uncertain dreaming, generally speaking a certain atmosphere whose specificity is rendered, to a large extent, by the epithet, too.

The works of the Romanian writers do not represent only a moment in the evolution of our literature; they are, also through diversity in unity, a thorough image of what symbolism meant to the evolution of the Romanian literature, summing up a whole stage of rearrangement of the means of expression and the taking over the Eminescu complex which had open the way to an unprecedented epigonism in the epoch and had amplified the traditionalist trends. The modernity of the Romanian symbolism will open the way to the great works of exquisite artistic expression of some poets who are works of the everlasting values of the Romanian literature: T. Arghezi, L. Blaga, I. Barbu. The literary critic and history also count G. Bacovia and I. Minulescu writers who start as symbolists and go further by their originality in approaching the aesthetics of this trend in their own way.

The research of the occurrence of the epithet proposes reevaluations of the similarities and differences between their works, in accordance with the definition of the traits of the specific universe. Starting from this approach, we have pointed out the emphasizing of the features in terms of expression of the Romanian symbolism, by taking into account the frequency of some stylistic devices (the epithet) to make clear the extent to which the works investigated may be considered representative to the aesthetics of the themes and motives of symbolism. According to Tudor Vianu: “the author of a literary work gets, through his epithets, the relief of the objects he wants to evoke to the reader’s fantasy and, by choosing some particular ones of all the possible ones, he mentions which of the traits of reality spoke louder to his imagination and sensitivity.

The study of epithets used by a writer is one of the best ways one can know him by” (1968, Studii de stilistica, chapter Epitetul eminescian, p. 174). Thus, the marks specifically symbolic were pointed out and they can be found in the works of many writers, but the original ones as well, the ones which point to Al. Macedonski, St. Petica, D. Anghel, G. Bacovia, I. Minulescu of all poets. Some of them could not impose themselves as their works followed the symbolic aesthetic principles, themes and motives. By reading the texts some surprising aspects have been revealed, even in the work of some writers less known.
The landscape of the lyric poetry studied is emphasized by a tendency to obsessively repeat some cliché and gives the impression of monotony when such epithets as “sweat”, “sad”, “white”, “black”, “pale” are used (see the epithet in the lyric of Romanian symbolists). The unity and correspondence of the stylistic devices with the themes and motives of the symbolic lyric poetry: spleen, neurosis, deception, loneliness are reflected by the epithet as well. This figure, with a particular role in the process of creating images, enters very often in phrases with metaphoric, personifying, allegoric, hyperbolic value and contributes to the creation of some specific symbols (see Interferences of the expressivity of the epithets). Thus, the revelation of the specific epithets of the specific epithets is possible, in terms of the aspect of the description and evaluation of the linguistic facts, considered independently of the context they enter, analyzing in this way the language of the writer and the description and the evaluation of the fact of the language, contrasted to the context, the one which offers them a certain aesthetic function.

The epithet may interfere with other figures of speech (metaphoric, antithetic, hyperbolic, personifying epithets) acquiring in this way more value by its rarity, its novelty and its contrast with the associated term. It reveals a feature more intensely by its stereotypy and its being repeated in the work of the representatives of the same literary trend and contributes to the creation of a specific, stylistic universe, thus drawing a clear line between the works belonging to the aesthetics of symbolism and other literary trends and movements, with which they may interfere, but not be mistaken for. In the symbolist lyric poetry, the frequency and the novelty of associating a certain epithet gives it the power of expression, amplifying the aesthetic emotion and contributing to outlining a lyric universe of a certain feature and originality. We know that “the poetic art opens ways to a wide range of combinations which permit the creation of some unique texts, although they may be put in frames, due to the marks of the poetic art, in a common category” (M. Net, Figura si arta poetica, in SCL XL, nr. 6, Bucuresti, Ed. Academiei Romane, 1989, p. 532).

Most of the epithets used are relevant for the symbolist lyric poetry as a whole; they are expressed through objectives, nouns plus prepositions, verb determinants (adverbs or adjectives) or, very often, nouns, more seldom appositions and relative clauses introduced by the relative pronoun “that” or “which”. These show an aesthetic maturity and deep interest in the form. Sometimes, the determined element is a metaphor, some other times the epithet itself enters the stylistic category of the figures of imagination, such as metaphor, hyperbole, allegory, personification, comparison or symbol through its expression values and its relation with the associated notions.

In the symbolist lyric poetry a new type of epithet appears not as frequently then, that is the synesthetic epithet, the one which sends, through its significance, next to the element it determined, to associations in different areas of the sensorial (sight, taste, smell, feel). The chromatic epithet, part of the synesthetic one, occupies a fairly important place on the frequency scale and is specific to the symbolist lyric poetry, thus being paid special attention to. The adorning epithet belongs, generally speaking, to the traditional line of the romantic poetry (“sweet”, “sad”), but there are some other epithets which outline the symbolist universe (“heavy”, “empty”) giving it the original, particular note, in accordance with the general orientation of the trend. As for the lexical unities there are not significant fluctuations or deviations.

The poets generally use neologisms to link to the everyday reality and, especially, to the urban environment, but also to conform to the new aesthetics which involved a kind of poetry for the initiated and a significant change of the kind of vocabulary which had been used up to that point. The lexical area of the epithet (see Occurrence of the epithet in the symbolist lyric poetry) deals with the vocabulary of the terms which denominate the sensorial – affected, psychological and spiritual life, their valence of negative expression being emphasized: “sad”, “sweet”, “bitter”, “mad”, “dead”, “alive”, “young”, “old”, “empty”, “deserted”, “tired”, “alone/lonely”, “funeral”, “fatal”, “satanic”, “tall”, “big/enormous/huge/immense/less”, “small”, “kind”, “saint”, “wet”, “soft”, “large”, or of chromatic terms: “white”, “black”, “red”, “yellow”, “green”, “grey”, “gray”, “purple”, “of blood”, “of lead”, “of gold/golden”, “of silver/silvery”, “of opal”, “of emerald”, “of onix”. The Romanian symbolist lyric poetry is characterized by the predominance of the adjectives whose negative connotations are often stressed by the ones of color in order to create an image as suggestive as possible for the transmission of the author’s intentions.

The itinerary of the investigation follows the stages:
1. Symbolist Meridians starts with the definition of the notion of symbol, by going over the European symbolism, continuing with the presentation of its most important theorists. Then a delimitation follows of the specific of the Romanian symbolism with the writers who find their place here (poets, writers and playwrights) and what bring new to the literary and stylistic landscape of the time.

2. The epithet in the poetry of the Romanian symbolist represents the main and substantial contribution to the investigation, found in an analysis and delimitation of the expressive values of the epithet, both in isolation, at phonetic, lexical, semantic and grammatical level, and from the perspective of its interaction with other figures of speech, such as metaphor, symbol, personification, oxymoron, hyperbole. At this point, in the paper, illustrative examples are brought to support the statements selected from the texts of the 42 symbolists, while paying attention to the emphasis at the occurrence level by its expressivity in a comparative-analytical vision, illustrated with examples from the authors in question.

3. Synesthesia, contextual implications offers a classification of the epithet predominantly synesthesic (69.26% of the total of the epithets, if the chromatic one is included) and of synesthesia as a means of establishing connections between the various levels of the senses, with special attention paid to the chromatic epithet, due to its frequent occurrence (40.36% of the examples given).

4. Means of symbolist expressivity which examines comparatively other ways of expression which are to be found in the symbolist lyric poetry: versification, rhythm, rhyme, measure, intonation, repetition.

5. Trajectories/Directions of the epithet offers a picture of the evolution/innovation of this figure of speech in the symbolist lyric poetry as well as statistics on the most important epithets which, due to their frequency level, signification and expressivity, define the universe of the symbolist lyric poetry.

The definition of the epithet with the necessary specifications and the analysis of the diachronic evolution of this notion was carried out in “The Notion of Epithet”, while in the other subdivisions it was evaluated descriptively and analytically by pointing out the particular features of the expressivity of this figure of speech. The epithet was particularized phonetically (the expressive values at sound level), lexically (the innovations brought by the symbolist lyric poetry to the expression level, issues of word formation, lexical derivatives and phrases, specific expression), semantically (on the one hand with the contribution of antonyms and synonyms and, on the other hand, of the extralinguistic ramification: regionalisms, archaisms, neologisms), morphologically (the morphological status of the epithet) and syntactically (attribute, apposition, predicative, extra/supplementary predicative, object of manner, relative clause with explanatory value, word order).

Acknowledgements

In the analytical subdivisions mentioned one can find details of the contextual implications of the epithet, with the varied types and classes: phonetic, lexical, semantic, grammatical (morphological, syntactical), of expressivity (of the epithet and its connections, its combinations with the others figures of speech) and of originality. The statistic criterion has been used at the end, as it helps the understanding of the stylistic aspect while making use of an analytical comparison of the evolution of the epithet according to types and authors.

The purpose of this research is to reveal the specific of the universe of the symbolist lyric poetry by pointing out of the epithets characteristic to and present in the works of most of the poets, by studying the expressivity and the connections between this figure of speech and the other figures of speech so as to get a significant and suggestive picture of the literary trend in question.

The epithet, a defining figure of speech of the relation between the writer’s educational background – his linguistic, literary and cultural horizon, shows to the same extent the way the creator of artistic images sees the surrounding reality and, submitting him to a priori aesthetics, it can outline the various sides of the poet’s sensitivity and originality.

The definition of the stylistic characteristics of the Romanian symbolist lyric poetry, in terms of occurrence of the epithet is also a natural result of this paper and it is the theme of the author’s Doctor degree paper (Magna cum laude) presented at “Lucian Blaga” University, Sibiu, Romania, in 2006, and which will be published in extensor in the book “The Epithet in the Romanian symbolist’s lyric poetry”.

References


