THE POEM AFORETIME (DEMULT) BY GEORGE BACOVIA: AN ANALYSIS

Irina-Ana Drobot
Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest

Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to analyse the poem Demult by George Bacovia, based on the framework provided by reader-response criticism, and free associations, in order to highlight the way in which the symbol, within the Symbolist movement, can have both a public and, especially, personal connotation. The poem analysed becomes, in addition, an example of atypical poem for poet George Bacovia's style, leaning more towards the Romantic movement influence than towards the influence of the Symbolist movement, marking, in fact, the specificity consisting of the overlapping between these two movements in Romanian culture. Additional insight into the understanding of this poem, next to the analysis based on literary and cutural studies, is provided by different translated versions.

Keywords: Symbolism, reader-response criticism, free associations, Romanticism, translations.

George Bacovia (1881-1957) is a well-known representative of Romanian Symbolism, which reached its peak with his and Ion Minulescu's works (Nicoară, 2002). Romanian Symbolism appeared about twenty years later than its country of origin, France, where it began around the 1850s and 1870s (Pietrykowsky, 2011), and the other European countries following the tendency, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, which led to its overlapping with Romanticism and Realism (Bote, 1966). This explains the presence of features and elements belonging to Romanticism in the poetry of Romanian Symbolists, starting with the precursor of Romanian Symbolism, Alexandru Macedonski. Romanian Symbolism spread over towards the beginning of the twentieth century (Nicolescu, 2012). According to Mykolaivna (2015), however, the overlap with Romanticism also occurred in the case of French Symbolism: "French symbolism is a literary and artistic direction that occurred within romanticism and the decadence of the mid-nineteenth century." In the case of Romania, it was the foreign influence and the decadence that made the Romanian mainstream scene hesitate to follow and to accept this trend (Faulk, 2014), as at the time it was considered that Romanian literature should be pure and do away with other influences from abroad. Mykolaivna (2015) further details the context, claiming that the "official birth of symbolism was in 1886, when "a new manifest of symbolism appeared (written by Jean Moreas)." Even in the conditions of the French Symbolism, "the basic principles of the aesthetics of symbolism were developed by Charles Baudelaire long before its official appearance" (Mykolaivna, 2015).

How can we recognize Symbolism in poetry? We can start from "the symbolist's perception of life, where the artists describe their sense of reality with the help of symbols" (Mykolaivna, 2015). With respect to the use of the symbol, we can distinguish between "two basic types of symbols — traditional symbols and individual symbols" (Mykolaivna, 2015). This is because "Some meanings are fixed in the dictionaries, while some occasional connotations can be determined only by the context" (Mykolaivna, 2015), and, in the opinion of the author of the present paper, also through free associations, based on what these symbols suggest to readers, as well as for the poetic persona. Free associations (Schachter, 2018) refer to a practice used in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, where the patient, in the analytic setting, says anything that comes to his or her mind in relation to an image, word, idea, or person. What comes to the patient's mind can be understood as the interpretation of the respective image or idea as a symbol, in the same way in which readers can interpret a poem.

French Symbolism includes the following features: “the conceptions of symbolization as correspondence between the spiritual and objective worlds, suggestion, artistic synthesis and synesthesia, beauty, the beautiful and the sublime” (Mankovskaya, 2015). Synesthesia means “establishing connections between the various levels of the sense” (Nicolescu, 2012). These features are going to be found in the poem called in Romanian *Demult* by George Bacovia, selected for analysis in this paper, since Symbolist movements in other countries, Romania included, took over main features from the originally French movement. What was specific for the artists that were representatives of this movement was the fact that they “conveyed their feelings, experiences and thoughts in the form of artistic symbols, the main features of which are suggestibility, figurativeness, musicality, creative intuition, spiritual accent and singularity” (Mankovskaya, 2015).

Bacovia’s work is known for its melancholic feelings and its “apocalyptic vision” (Agrigoroaie, 2021), and for the presence of death and decay. The poem *Lead* is, in this sense, the best known for this vision on his work, where the image of the heavy lead permeates the entire world and leads to images of death, and depression. The poem *Demult* (*Aforetime* in the translation by Cocoş, 2020) is an exception to this perception of his work by readers knowing his from the Romanian literature textbooks for highschool. It is a love poem, consisting of two stanzas, shown below in the original version by Bacovia in the Romanian language and in the English version, translated by Cocoş (2020).

The methodological framework is based on cultural studies, since the context of the age, with respect to Symbolism, matters in the analysis of this poem, combined with literary studies, as textual analysis is the main point from where the analysis begins, based on reader-response criticism (Mart, 2019), as the perception of the reader gains centre stage and connects all the other approaches. A literary text such as a poem cannot be interpreted in isolation, without taking into account the context in which it was written and the context of the present time the readers belong to and its attached mindset based on which they can interpret the text. Both cultural background and personal life context can provide guidelines for the readers to interpret the poem by Bacovia chosen for analysis in the present paper.

The first stanza presents readers with the place and time, as well as the situation. The place is someone’s lane, the time is during nighttime, and the situation is that of a reflective poetic persona regarding, as readers infer, a past or lost love:

> Trecând pe strada ta,
> Pe care nimeni n-o mai ştie -
> Al nopţii foşnet evoca:
> - Filosofie! (Bacovia, 2024)
>
> When I was walking down your lane,
> Which disappeared from memory,
> The night breeze whispered in my brain:
> – Philosophy! (Cocoş, 2020)

The poetic persona starts off from a real-life setting, from a real place, which brings him to his memories of a past romantic relationship. We notice here free associations, both in the case of the poetic persona, and of the readers. The poetic persona starts, in first stanza to put forth the word “Philosophy!” as a free association to the setting. The same word ends the second stanza, while it continues with the emptiness associated with the nighttime setting, and the belated poem, which is uttered by a guard, and which readers and the poetic persona freely associate with the poem and words the poetic persona would have wished to present before the loved person:

Încet, un paznic fluiera
Poema-atâta de târzie…
Pustiul nopţii evoca:
- Filosofie! (Bacovia, 2024)

A guard was humming in his seat
The lyrics were a mystery...
Night's emptiness began to tweet:
– Philosophy! (Cocoş, 2020)

Philosophy can be seen, first of all, to be a free association with the reflective mood of the poetic persona suggested by this poem.

What stands out about this poem that has been identified as being about love is that it does not include the usual props and setting associated with death, decay, and depression for which readers know him and which are the aspects the most frequently associated with his work. Readers may associate the atmosphere, setting, props, and the topic of absent lover or unrequited love with the poems of Mihai Eminescu, thus showing the presence of features usually found in poems belonging to the Romantic movement.

The poem is about the implied and indirectly expressed lost love of the poetic persona, and the longing of the poetic persona for the loved one's presence. Readers interpret the situation based on the context, like in pragmatics. They are situated in a certain setting and the poetic persona can be pictured like an interlocutor. What is not is easily inferred, namely that he is alone and that "your lane" (Cocoş, 2020) has the connotation of the home where the loved lady lives or lived, and where the poetic persona may have stopped to talk to her, to take her on a date, or where he may have just watched her, not daring to actually speak to her. All these details are suggested, or alluded to, and readers are prompted to imagine this entire story. The poetic persona presents a simple account of reality, of the way he passes by the street where the readers understand the loved person lives, or has lived, and the he is walking there alone late at night. There is just a guard whistling a song, whose lyrics are a poem, which is presented so late, which could mean that it is literally late at night, or that the poetic persona has missed saying those words to the lady he loved, some time ago, which further leads readers to understand that he has missed this opportunity. This poem is, judging by this interpretation, about unrequited love. In this case, all the clues related to the setting of late at night resonate with it being too late to be together with the loved lady in a Romantic relationship.

What is also obvious when coming into contact with this poem is that the symbols are there by means of personal interpretation and relevance, in a manner reminding of Freud's free associations, and which is due to the indirect communication present in the poem. Props and utterances have the same role as in pragmatics, in the situations of communication, where various meanings are implied and inferred by the interlocutors, based on the context. The context can include body language, setting, relationship between those participating in the communicational exchange, as well as background knowledge we all share about the way in which we communicate in various social situations. The fact that a literary text, or any text, for that matter, can be seen as an invitation to dialogue, is well-known, as any text invites interpretation, as well as an emotional reaction from readers, based on a reader-response approach (Mart, 2019). Interpreting and reacting emotionally to a text is part of the readers' spontaneous, or natural, reactions, and the poem *Demult* by George Bacovia is no exception. Readers form an image of what is typical of a certain authors and have certain expectations

when they set out to read their work. This poem by George Bacovia contradicts the images readers have formed about him, and perceive it as atypical. Readers have their own free associations which have created the image of Bacovia based on previous experience with the poems that have been previously taught and presented to them in highschool textbooks, influencing their perception of this poet. The poem chosen for analysis in this paper completely challenges their previous perception and assumptions about Bacovia. It is a poem that makes them rethink their previously formed impressions and that makes them wonder if they have not misjudged him. This is a usual experience in everyday life, regarding the image we have formed about certain persons, and which can be contradicted at some point.

One means by which previously held beliefs and perceptions about Bacovia and generalizations made about his poems can be challenged is through translations.

Translations of the poem *Demult* by George Bacovia from Romanian into English can offer entirely different interpretations of the whole poem based on the way we understand the line: "Pe care nimeni n-o mai ştie -" (Bacovia, 2024). In Romanian, the line is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could mean both that nobody else than the poetic persona remembers the street, since it has an emotional meaning for him, due to the association with the romantic relationship which has happened and then stopped or which may not have happened at all, since he has lost the opportunity. On the other hand, it could mean that not even the poetic persona remembers that street, yet now as he is walking on it memories return. The poetic persona may have pushed the experience away from his memory, as it had been a sad memory of a lost love due to various reasons, or may have gone over it or believed he had done so, as the poem proves he has not. He is still suffering after the lost love. This is visible since, while wishing to push the memory away, the memory returns in full force.

Since no other translated versions into the English language than the one provided by Cocoş (2020) have been found by the author of the present paper, Chat GPT was considered to be a source of offering additional and alternative interpretations to this poem by Bacovia based on translated versions from Romanian into English. English can be considered as a much more precise language than Romanian, as the latter proves to be more prone towards ambiguities in the meaning of words.

Since Chat GPT is an example of how artificial intelligence can lead to surprising results, the author of the present paper has tried to ask Chat GPT for a faithful translation of Bacovia's poem *Demult*. The result is visible in the presence of the "rustle of the night," which, in the translation by Cocoş (2020), had turned into a whisper, and into one which was attributed to the brain of the poetic persona starting from "the night breeze:"

> Long Ago
>
> Passing by your street,
> Which no one knows anymore—
> The rustle of the night evoked:
> —Philosophy!
>
> Slowly, a watchman whistled,
> This poem, so late...
> The desolation of the night evoked:
> —Philosophy! (Chat GPT, faithful translation)

The translation by Cocoş (2020), therefore, creates a personification, through which the connection between poetic persona and natural setting is created. The translation by Chat GPT offers a more subtle connection between poetic persona and natural surroundings, as the

"rustle of the night" becomes a means of referring, indirectly, to the way in which the poetic persona perceives reality and the way in which he connects emotionally to his surroundings in order to consider philosophical reflections starting from the external reality, which he interprets based on his emotional reactions to it. Knowledgeable readers could consider the possibilities offered by environmental psychology (Mozer & Uzzell, 2003) to explain that we, human beings, always experience an emotional reaction towards our surroundings, be they nature or a medium designed by other human beings, and intended to make us react in a certain way.

The author of the present paper has resorted to Chat GPT's translation since she believed it may bring insight into alternative ways of interpreting the second line of the first stanza, as well as the entire poem altogether. We can notice how the title is different from the one proposed by Cocoș (2020), which was *Aforetime*. This time it is *Long Ago*, which makes reference to the nostalgic mood that is present throughout the poem.

In this version, the title of the poem refers to a time of the past, before the present moment, when the poetic persona is walking on the street of his former love and remembers the past, which is that of the time they had the romantic relationship. The title serves as a means of taking a distance in time from the romantic relationship that is now gone, yet this attempt is futile. The poetic persona seems as involved now as he has been in the past, and feelings have not faded for his past romantic interest.

The second translated version provided by Chat GPT was given when the author of the present paper asked for a creative version of the translation of Bacovia's poem, and the result was the following:

> Once, Long Ago
>
> I passed your forgotten street,
> Lost to all but memory—
> The night's whispers murmured softly:
> —Philosophy.
>
> A watchman's tune drifted slow,
> A poem, fragile and forlorn...
> The empty night sighed deeply:
> —Philosophy. (Chat GPT, creative translation)

This second version provided by Chat GPT adds to the understanding of Bacovia's poem, since the second line mentions that all the past romantic relationship is "Lost to all but memory—," underlining that, for the poetic persona, this relationship is still significant, and that he preserves it in memory, even if in reality it is no longer going on. This shows that, to the poetic persona, this romantic relationship not only was meaningful, but still is, to the present day, while it is no longer going on in reality. Readers wonder what may have happened, and if there was a break-up, or if the relationship even actually had a beginning, as maybe the poetic persona has just longed for a relationship but had never actually dared to start one. The poetic persona may have only contemplated the possibility of a romantic relationship, which maybe would have never even been able to become a reality, after all. This makes this romantic relationship appear as all the more tragic. The "empty night" in this version could, under the perspective of the author of the present paper, be better expressed as the "emptiness of the night," as in this sense it would suggest the psychological emptiness the poetic persona feel due to the loss of the romantic relationship which happened, but did not continue, or, more tragically, which never was. The relationship may have all been a fantasy

of the poetic persona, and, in this way, it may be all the more pictured as an ideal that was never fulfilled. The literal emptiness of the setting at nighttime, when nobody else is around, can be, based on this interpretation, supported and echoes by the figurative emptiness of the poetic persona when faced with his loss of the loved lady.

In the creative version provided by Chat GPT, the street where the love interest of the poetic persona lived is "Lost to all but memory," which is a clear difference from the previous "Which disappeared from memory," in the interpretation visible in the translation by Cocoş (2020). The two translations show a completely opposite interpretation and understanding of the poem. Since we do not know what the poetic persona meant, as readers, but instead are only left to guess, both interpretations can be equally valid. The poetic persona may feel that the past and his own feelings may have been a simple fantasy, or illusion, or that the entire relationship may have only been going on in his imagination. Such as impression is due to the feeling of deceit when a romantic relationship is suddenly over, especially since the poetic persona is understood by the readers to have invested a lot in it. The sense of futility, or emptiness, becomes prominent in such a case, which explains the phrase "The empty night," present even in the creative translation version asked by the author of the present paper from Chat GPT. The faithful translation provided by Chat GPT included the equivalent "The desolation of the night," which has the connotations of the feeling of emptiness and futility, as well as loneliness of the poetic persona. Cocoş (2020) has proposed the version "Night's emptiness," which clearly resonates with the interior emptiness experienced by the poetic persona when the romantic relationship has been ended. This is an indirect suggestion that the poetic persona is suffering, feeling incomplete, or alone. The emptiness suggests a sense of futility to everything in this life, since, when no longer in a relationship, for each and everyone of us, the sense of meaning and of stability collapse. At this point, each and every reader is given the possibility to resonate with the values and mindset proposed by the poem written by Bacovia (2024). In this sense, the setting and the feelings of the poetic persona incorporated in the setting become means of expression for the poetic persona. This shows readers the way in which the poetic persona supports the values of the poetic persona and integrates them the way it is visible from the very way reality is presented in this poem.

The word "Philosophy," which is present at the and as an ending to the two stanzas of the poem, can be interpreted by readers as showing that the poetic persona is going on through a process of deep reflection and thinking prompted by the experiences and settings previously mentioned. Readers are, in turn, prompted to consider their own thoughts based on the first and second stanzas of this poem and also based on the way the setting has been presented for readers. Readers, just like the poetic persona, are invited to create their free associations based on elements from the external reality with they come in contact and which hold for the psychological, or emotional, significance. This significance is visible in the way we tend to assign affective meaning to objects belonging to the external world around us. The philosophy can refer to the personal life philosophy of the poetic persona and of his readers, to the way in which they perceive and understand the world, as well as to the way in which the poetic persona interprets the world. In addition, the word "Philosophy" could refer to the way in which we all understand and interpret the relationships with the others, in this case a meaningful relationship, one of love and romance. With respect to a romantic relationship, we are more prone than in the case of any other relationship, to reconsider who we are in relation to that significant person in our lives, and how we can redefine ourselves based on this meaningful relationship of love.

The translation itself becomes a means of interpretation, offering insight into the meaning of the poem. This is visible in the different translated versions mentioned in this

paper and in the way they have been interpreted to bring various ways of understanding of Bacovia's (2024) poem titled *Demult*.

The way the emptiness and rustle of the night, visual and auditory images, evoke the process of reflection, can be seen as instances of synaesthesia, or moment when several sense overlap. We have noticed, based on the different translated versions, the way in which words and their meanings are significant in offering the readers' understanding of the poem, especially in the case if the line "Pe care nimeni n-o mai știe –" (Bacovia, 2024), referring to the street where the loved lady of the poetic persona once lived, or still lives, but no longer is in a relationship with the poetic persona. The suggested title of the translated poem from Romanian into English by the author of the present paper is *Once Upon a Time*, since it makes reference to the time of youth of the poetic persona, when he was very much in love and when he had an idealized vision of the world and of life. This is because, likely, the poetic persona is, at the present time, rather old and contemplating an episode in his youth, when he was very much in love and when he had a utopic vision of the world, to which he inevitably returns based on the process of memory, becoming hopeful again, while, at the same time, realizing the futility of it all, and the ephemerality of such episodes of optimism and happiness in our lives. In addition, love stories and romantic relationships are viewed in terms of fairy-tales, due to the moments of happiness they are related to, especially in the so-called honeymoon phase, when everything seems to be perfect, and when our entire vision of life becomes contaminated with an unrealistic sense of optimism. The word "Philosophy," present at the end of each of the two stanzas making up the poem, can be understood as a means of bringing us down to earth, together with the poetic persona, by making us reflect on the past. The reflections are not directly present; they are only implied, indirectly, and the readers understand that the poetic persona is in a melancholic, or nostalgic mood, thinking affectionately about the past romantic relationship mentioned in this poem.

It is surprising how much insight into the human mind and feelings artificial intelligence can provide, through the two translated versions, one closer to the original, and the other offering a creative translation, as asked by the author of the present paper. The way Chat GPT solves the ambiguity of the second line of the first stanza is worth keeping in mind, since it reflects the very process of thinking and interpreting human readers of this poem can go through, the author of this present paper included.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agrigoroaie, C. M. (2021). George Bacovia in a Uniform Universe. *Studii și cercetări științifice. Seria filologie*, (45), 45-53.

Bacovia, G. (2024). *Demult*. https://www.versuri.ro/versuri/george-bacovia-demult/

Cocoş, O. (2020). George Bacovia - 10 poems translated into English. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343152209_George_Bacovia_-_10_poems_translated_into_English

Faulk, B. J. (2014). Symbolism and Decadence. A Companion to Modernist Poetry, 144-156.

Mankovskaya, N. B. (2015). French symbolism: Aesthetic dominants. *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, *53*(1), 54-71.

Mart, C. (2019). Reader-response theory and literature discussions: A Springboard for exploring literary texts. *The New Educational Review*, *56*(2), 78-87.

Moser, G., & Uzzell, D. (2003). Environmental psychology. *Comprehensive handbook of psychology*, *5*, 419-445.

Mykolaivna, K. M. (2015). The language of French symbolism. *European journal of literature and linguistics*, (1), 15-17.

Nicoară, R. (2022). Macedonski, Forerunner of Romanian Symbolism. *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, (28), 1035-1039.

Nicolescu, C. (2012). One Theoretical Synthesis Approach of Romanian Symbolist Poetry–Modernism Dawn. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *46*, 3696-3700.

Pietrykowski, W. (2011). From Poe to Rimbaud: A Comparative View of Symbolist Poetry. The Journal of Undergraduate Research at Ohio State, 2.

Schachter, J. (2018). Free association: From Freud to current use—the effects of training analysis on the use of free association. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, *38*(6), 457-467.