

## THE EVOLUTION OF VANITAS VANITATUM MOTIF IN THE XVII<sup>th</sup> AND XVIII<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Studiul de față prezintă evoluția motivului *VANITAS VANITATUM* în literatura engleză din secolele al XVII-lea și al XVIII-lea, urmărind evoluția acestuia atât în poezie, cât și în proză. Atenție interpretativă se acordă romanului „Călătoriile Pelerinului” de John Bunyan (1628-1685).

All historical and religious events during the XVII<sup>th</sup> and XVIII<sup>th</sup> centuries influenced literature of the time, that's why in the works of G. Herbert, J. Bunyan and S. Johnson one can find various interpretations of these events; interpretations which lead to *Vanitas Vanitatum* motif.

Though, there were certain episodic references to this motif in English Literature, the first serious preoccupation with *Vanitas Vanitatum* motif could be attested in XVII<sup>th</sup> century English Literature. Moreover, it could be detected both in the poetry and prose of the time.

While referring to the poetry, literary history uses to mention two main groups of poets in the first half of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century, the *cavalier* and the *metaphysical* poets. Cavalier poets were the followers of Ben Jonson and Donne each in his own way represented a revolt against Spenserian tradition and they had a decisive impact on the future of the English poetry. To have a more or less complete picture of the poetry in England in the first half of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century it is necessary to distinguish two other groups: the *secular* poets (R. Herrick, Th. Carew, J. Suckling, and R. Lovelace) and the *religious* poets (G. Herbert, A. Marvell, H. Vaughan, Th. Traherne and R. Crashaw).

The name of metaphysical poets was suggested in 1693 by J. Dryden (1631-1700) to disapprove J. Donne who affected metaphysics in his amorous verses.

Reacting against smooth and sweet tones of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century poetry, the metaphysical poets adopted an energetic and vigorous style. Metaphysical poets tried to investigate the world by rational discussion of its phenomena and metaphysical aspects form the substance of their poetry. Metaphysical means here, beyond physics. Their poetry, in fact, is psychological. It has to use inventiveness which resulted in unexpected metaphors. The main device applied by metaphysical poetry was conceit, originated from the Italian *conchetto* that is an intricate metaphorical figure resulting from a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of resemblances in things apparently unlike. The reader has to use both, his knowledge and imagination to identify an analogy.

Besides J. Donne, who was the father of the metaphysical poetry, one of the most prominent writers representing the religious device is George Herbert (1593-1633).

In many ways, G. Herbert's poetry shows the influence of J. Donne, Herbert's temperament, however, was very different from that of his doubt-ridden, anxious mentor. The poetry Herbert wrote is graceful, pious verse intended to instill devotion by giving pleasure. The attitude of man to God in Herbert's poems is one of reverence, but also of love, a close and mutually sustaining relationship. Herbert is one of the few poets who can call God "my dear" without seeming presumptuous. The simple piety of his poetry was much admired in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century. Modern critics have noted the subtlety rather than the simplicity of his poems, seeing them as an attempt to express the ultimately ineffable complications of the spiritual life.

One "spiritual conflict" [5, p.234] presented in his collection "The Temple", is vanity, because two poems from his collection are entitled "Vanitie".

In the poem "Vanitie" (I), Herbert blames the "poore man" [5, p.234] for searching wealth and fame, and for forgetting about the existence of God. He suggests that our own salvation from the vanities of this world is "his glorious law" [5, p.234]. The religion is the only true thing which a person can possess, although, he could "finde out death, but missets life at hand" [5, p.234]. In "Vanitie" (II), the one who ought to be blamed is "poore silly soul" [2, p.236]. The soul in this case represents the human personality of this period. People changed, they had poor souls "whose hope and head lies low/ whose flat delights on earth do creep and

grow”... [2, p.236]. They neglected God and didn't follow his word, and for that, they had to be punished. That's why the second part of the poem is like a curse addressed to these atheists. “If souls be made of earthly mold, / Let them love gold, / If born of high, / Let them into their kindred flier: / For they can never be at rest, / Till they regain their ancient nest” [2, p.236].

Herbert ends the poem with an Ecclesiastical simile “for earthly joy is but a bubble”... [2, p.236] in other words: everything is vanity in this world and just true religion is our own escape.

What give to these poems the specific air of metaphysics are the conceits: “Heark and beware, lest what now do measure/ and write for sweet, prove a most sowre displeasure” [2, p.234]; “The fleet Astronomer can bore./ And thread the spheres with his quick piercing minde/ he sees their dances, and knoweth long before, the secret glances” [2, p.234]; “The callow principles within their nest/ To ordinarie suitours at the door” [2, p.234], these conceits representing the duality of human vanity: spiritual and material ones.

These poems, “Vanie” (I) and “Vanie” (II), contributed to the evolution of *Vanitas Vanitatum* motif in English Literature representing the premises of its usage, being inserted with his religious conceptions and argumentating completely the Bible's learning.

Speaking about prose in the XVIIIth century English Literature, it should be recognized that John Bunyan (1628-1685) transported *Vanitas Vanitatum* motif through the Victorian looking-glass in his allegorical novel “Pilgrim's Progress” (1678-1684).

“The Pilgrim's Progress, from this world to that which is to come” is a Christian allegory begun in 1675, and part I was published in 1678. This was subsequently revised and the complete text appeared in the third edition (1679). Part two was published in 1684.

In part I the story open with the author's dream in which he sees Christian with his burden reading a book, which relates a prophecy that his city will be destroyed. Evangelist tells him to leave the City of Destruction and journey to the wicket-gate; beyond the gate is the way to the Celestial City. Christian cannot persuade his family to accompany him and he sets off alone.

In this part, Bunyan uses the familiar metaphor of life being a journey, but it is not an ordinary one. The places Bunyan used were familiar ones in the English countryside – the slough, the meadow with its stile, the highway, the castle, the river, a country fair – but he gives them fascinating names such as the Slough of Despond, Doubting Castle, the Delectable Mountains, Vanity Fair. The inhabitants are strange and wonderful, including other pilgrims, hobgoblins.

The hero of Bunyan's novel comes to a great city where a fair is; there everything is on sale...”...a fair wherein should be sold all sorts of vanity, and that it should last all the year long. Therefore, at this fair there are all such merchandise sold as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as...wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not.

Moreover, at this fair there are at all times to be seen jugglings, cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves and rogues, and that of every kind” [1, p.58]. This key passage represents the frame work of Thackeray's “Vanity Fair”.

Part II of “Pilgrim's Progress” tells how Christian's wife, Christina, follows her husband to the city after being inspired by a vision. She is accompanied by her children and a neighbour. Their pilgrimage is far less interesting since the reader knows what they will encounter. However, the author's strength as a writer makes many passages in this gentler chronicle memorable and the small change of the domestic scene is presented with humor and warmth.

The popularity of “Pilgrim's Progress” was long confined to readers of the lower and middle classes. It was written for the people by a man of the people. It was written by a dissenter at a time when dissenters were persecuted and despised, and its distinctly religious purpose, as well as the humble station of its author, combined to place it outside the conventional bounds of literature. The polite world disdained it; the critics ignored it, or failed to take it seriously. But in the course of hundred years the power of the book began to impress the literary and fashionable classes, and today the fame of Bunyan's masterpiece is probably greater than it has ever been before. It has been translated into many foreign languages, and it stands with those few supreme books which remain the delight and admiration of the high and the low, the young and the old, the ignorant and the cultured.

Bunyan chose for his allegory a broad and vital theme. His purpose is purely practical, and his appeal is not to the head but to the heart. The key note of Bunyan's book is the cry of the individual conscience; it is

heard in the question of Christian at the very beginning of the allegory. "What shall I do to be saved?" [7, p.235]. Bunyan's appeal is thus direct and personal, for Christian, the pilgrim, is a representative man, and the general treatment of these theme is so broadly human that Christian's pilgrimage becomes the living and dramatic record of man's spiritual progress.

The theme of almost universal interest is not presented in an abstract, or doctrinal form, it is made real by the intensity of Bunyan's earnestness, and picturesque and dramatic by the vividness of his poetic imagination. Christian's experiences are real to us because they were real to Bunyan; because Bunyan himself had sunk in the Slough of Despond, climbed the Hill of Difficulty. He could describe these things from bitter experience; he could describe them poetically because he had that power of imagery which distinguishes the poet. It is this inborn power to conceive of the invisible an intangible in objective forms that makes the allegory in "Pilgrim's Progress" so spontaneous, so free from any suggestion of artifice. Bunyan, moreover, was not a mere visionary, oblivious of the vulgar realities around him; he was a shrewd observer of human life and character, and his intensely spiritual nature was well ballasted with humor and solid common sense. Although "Pilgrim's Progress" purports to be a dream, Bunyan does not transport us to a cloud land. Christian travels through our familiar and everyday world, meeting many substantial human beings in the course of his journey; the very names of Bunyan's characters are often miracles of characterization.

To such enduring qualities in "Pilgrim's Progress" one must add the remarkable strength, simplicity, and beauty of its style. Like many other Puritan, Bunyan read and reread the Bible. His style was formed, his images were often taken from this great model, and his prose has much of the grandeur and restraint of his original.

Bunyan's gifts of psychological insight, characterization, and suspenseful narration have led many to see in "Pilgrim's Progress" the forerunner of the modern novel. As a tribute to the lasting influence of Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress", in modern writing one still encounters such phrases as "the slough of despond", [3, p.331] "the house beautiful" [3, p.331], "Mr. Wordly-Wiseman" [3, p.331}, "Vanity Fair" [3, p.331].

The further promoter of *Vanitas Vanitatum* motif represents the XVIIIth century. It was S. Johnson who wrote the poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes", which included some aspects of the vanity of human nature.

S.Johnson dominates the English literary scene. He became one of the mythical heroes of the British common sense. The range of his work is great, it has remarkable unity; for, whatever the stretch of his mind into natural science, philology or history, it returns insistently to central moral themes, and notably to his favorite ones, the efforts of the mind to escape the limitations of the actual. Weather in stupor or fantasy, in self-deception or in distraction, the mind seeks the elude that reality that stands outside it and rebuffs its system.

All these projects were accompanied as well by the remarkable poems, one of them being "The Vanity of Human Wishes" (1748). This poem is written in imitation of Juvenal's "Tenth Satire" and published, with Johnson's name, in January, 1749.

"The Vanity of Human Wishes" has ever been sufficiently known or appreciated. It certainly lacks the sweetness of Goldsmith, and it never attains the polished versification of Pope, in its own manner it is unsurpassed. The tendency of the satire is perhaps mournful, but scarcely more so than the treatment which the subject requires. Every phase of "motely life" [8, p.461] is passed in review, and the different careers of the churchman, the politician, the soldier, and the statesman are touched upon with great beauty and force. In each case the moral is the same, "The Vanity of Human Wishes".

Like Pope's Horatian imitations, Johnson's is a free adaptation of Juvenal's poem to his own time and to his own frame and thought. This is nowhere clearer than in the closing lines, where Juvenal writes, "You would have no divinity if there were wisdom; it is we who make a goddess of you, Fortune, and place you in the heavens" [6, p.127]. Johnson sees instead the force of "celestial wisdom" [6, p.127] saving man from himself, making the good fortune man cannot create for himself or even ask properly. Johnson found in Juvenal a "mixture of gaiety and stateliness, of pointed sentences" [6, p.128] "and declamatory grandeur" [6, p.128]. His version is formal and austere using the spacious generalization to indicate the ludicrous folly, as the brilliant lines on the displaced favourite, whose image has lost its goodness with its greatness.

The density of Johnson's diction is best seen in such compressed phrases, from which numerous particulars can be surmised, as "the general massacre of gold" [8, p.142] or "dubious title shakes the madded land" [8, p.142].

His poetry is formal, and it shows the classical fondness for satire and aversion to sentiment. The first two lines of the poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes" "Let observation with extensive view/ Survey mankind

from China to Peru...” [8, p.142] show the classical couplet which he employs, and they afford an example of poetry produced by a sonorous combination of words. “Observation” [8, p.142], “view” [8, p.142] and “survey” [8, p.142] are nearly synonymous terms. Such conscious effort centered on word building subtracts from poetic feeling.

On the other hand, this poem is not so much an imitation as a companion study by one who, amid different circumstances, took a very similar view of life. Instead of the Roman illustration, one has modern instances of hope that lay in power, and learning and war, and long life and beauty.

The poem is completely satisfying as a statement of its theme. It is no less valuable as a personal document. There is nothing in it but what Johnson consistently thought and felt. He was wont to say that there is more to be endured than enjoyed in the general condition of human life; and he had found that human happiness, if it ever comes, must come by our own effort. The concluding lines state his invariable experience. He said that happiness is to be placed only in virtue, which is always to be obtained. In his simple piety, he gave himself to the earnest exercise of religion.

Johnson gave to “The Vanity of Human Wishes” a religious conclusion which reflected his own practice. He was not a pessimist. The sense of vanity may keep us from thinking that things are better than they are, but it need not make us think that they are worse. He would maintain in talk that the world was not half as wicked as it was represented to be, that there was very little gross wickedness in it, and very little extraordinary virtue, this dose of optimism being suggested by the ideology and innovations which brought his era.

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