Prosopopoeia as a Cognitive Ekphrastic Activity:

A Case from Eighteenth-Century Graveyard Poetry

PROSOPOPEE COMME UNE ACTIVITE COGNITIVE EKPHRASTIQUE:

UN EXEMPLE DE LA POESIE DE CIMETIERE DU DIX-HUITIEME SIECLE

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of prosopopoeia in selected eighteenth-century graveyard poetry, highlighting, through close analysis of William Collins's "Ode on the Death of Mr. Thompson" and Robert Blair's "The Grave", the poetic, visual, and intellectual underpinnings of prosopopoeia. That is, it aims mainly at revealing the cognitive aspects of prosopopoeia with limited employment of textually analyzed verse that is used only to provide an exemplifying background. It turns out that in their use of the personified abstraction, poets, in general, creatively produce poetry that seeks to concretize human visions and passions in a manner that is universally accessible. That is to say, the cognitive is *essenced* into the visualized and personified. As they personify, poets do not write, nor write about nature, feeling, thought, and man. Rather, they become the means or ways through whom the experiences of nature, feeling, and thought communicate themselves. Above all, such cognitive nature of visual poetry is proposed as motive for inquiries about the overemphasized rift between the humanities and the sciences.
Keywords: prosopopoeia; personification; cognition; graveyard poetry; William Collins; Robert Blair.

Résumé: Cet article examine l'utilisation de prosopopée dans la poésie de cimetière sélectionnée du dix-huitième siècle, mettant en évidence, à travers une analyse attentive de "L'ode à la mort de M. Thompson" de William Collins et "La cimetière" de Robert Blair, la base poétique, visuelle et intellectuelle de la prosopopée. Autrement dit, il vise principalement à révéler les aspects cognitifs de la prosopopée avec un emploi limité de verset textuellement analysé qui est utilisé uniquement à fournir un arrière-plan illustrant. Il s'avère que dans leur utilisation de l'abstraction personnifiée, des poètes, en général, produisent de façon créative des poésies, qui visent à concrétiser des visions et des passions humaines d'une manière universellement accessible. C'est-à-dire, le

cognitif est intégré dans la visualisation et la personnification. Quand ils personnifient, les poètes ne décrivent pas la nature, le sentiment, la pensée, oul'homme. Au contraire, ils deviennent les moyens ou les manières par lesquelles les expériences de la nature, des sentiments et de la pensée qui se communiquent. Par-dessus tout, ce genre de nature cognitive de la poésie visuelle est proposé comme motif de demandes de renseignements sur le fossé trop insisté entre les humanités et les sciences.

Mots-clés: prosopopée; personnification; cognition; poésie de cimetière; William Collins; Robert Blair

1. INTRODUCTION

'Prosopopoeia' ('personified abstraction') is a figure of speech that designates the linguistic act of giving human qualities to abstract ideas, animals, and inanimate objects. The attribute 'abstract' refers to words or phrases that name things not knowable through the five human senses. Perhaps the earliest view of personification comes from ancient rhetoric in which an abstract entity is turned into an agent embodying a moral value, so that the value is understood through its personification into personae whom we receive as figures standing for the ideals they characterize. One may perhaps refer to "Mystery' and 'Morality' plays in Middle English literature, the first dealing with what seemed then obscure Christian notions such as Genesis and Crucifixion, and the second with moral Christian values, as domains where prosopopoeia was recruited to help in creating a graspable discourse. By personifying, the abstract figure (such as hope, friendship, love etc.) or the event (like death) are rendered according to a human scale, so as to understand them concretely as personified agents parallel to human beings. Poets, as also everyday individuals, personify when they metaphorically give life to normally inanimate objects or human experiences (feelings, thoughts, etc.) that are not sensed by the mostly acknowledged five human senses. In that sense, poets turn imaginary entities into lifelike actors or agents. As such, prosopopoeia might be approached as a visual, perhaps ekphrastic, technique poets employ to facilitate cognitive reception and comprehension. Hence, we personify to make the world make sense to us, an act the graveyard poets adopted as they dealt with the abstract notion of death. This paper examines the use of prosopopoeia in selected eighteenth-century graveyard poetry, highlighting, through close analysis of William Collins's "Ode on the Death of Mr. Thompson" and Robert Blair's "The Grave", the poetic, visual, and intellectual underpinnings of prosopopoeia. That is, it aims mainly at revealing the cognitive aspects of prosopopoeia with limited employment of textually analyzed verse that is used only to provide an exemplifying background.

2. WILLIAM COLLINS'S "ODE ON THE DEATH OF MR. THOMPSON" AND ROBERT BLAIR'S "THE GRAVE"

The "Graveyard School" designates a group of eighteenth-century poets whose poetry is characterized by frequent melancholic focus on themes of death, mortality, and religion, their principle poetic objects including mostly graves, churchyards, night, death, and ghosts. This poetry is mostly elegiac, lamenting death and presenting gloomy imagery of funereal, tombs, graves, and ruins, about all of which poets discoursed poetically, posing hence as men interested in the 'Art of Dying'. But it is agreed that they attempted to turn such terrifying images and ideas into spiritual and aesthetic appreciation of the symbolic experience of the tomb and death, adopting a gothic attitude of extreme interest and joy in the attractions of darkness, gloom, obscurity, mystery, and nihilism. They found in these a field where the imagination can freely create poetry in which they discussed the futility of human existence and the immortality of mankind. However, they simultaneously revealed Christian values as they used the gloomy imagery in spiritual contemplations of human mortality in relation to the divine and to such notions as afterlife, to evoke ideas of divine punishment and/or reward. Thus, death was the provocative source of the Graveyard poets' moral and poetic inspiration. Further, the Graveyard poets' frequent emphasis on the lives and deaths of ordinary individuals allies them to the Romantic poets' interest in the commonplace and common man, and the

melancholic nature of graveyard poems is similar to the Romantic interest in 'negative' emotional states, such as Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" and Keats's "Ode on Melancholy". The following are the major Graveyard poets: Mark Akenside, James Beattie, Robert Blair, William Collins, William Cowper, Thomas Gray, James Macpherson, Thomas Parnell, William Shenstone, James Thomson, Joseph Warton, Thomas Warton the Younger, and Edward Young.

To start with, "Ode on the Death of Mr. Thompson", one of the most famous of William Collins's poems, is an elegiac expresses of Collins's sadness at the death of his friend, the poet James Thompson. Collins imagines himself sailing down the River Thames close to Richmond where Thompson was buried. Collins highlights the features of the landscape and shows the progress and movement of time through imagery of the seasons. He begins by mentioning the Druid lying buried in the grave close to the waves of the river and among the sweet flowers which decorate the grave. He then mentions how he will lay his harp by the grave of the friend whose heart used to bleed sorrow. Young males and females will stop by this grave to pity the loss of this great man as they hear the strong sound of the funeral bell. Other people will also visit the shores of the river close to the grave where the gentle spirit of Thompson rests peacefully. The people will shed tears amidst the beautiful scenes of Nature. But these tears are no more than a silent tribute to the man and will not reveal the great man's life which is wasted forever. On the other hand, there is one person, Collins himself, whose heart will not find pleasure in the beautiful Nature and instead regret the loss of the great poet of Nature. The poet can see the fairy valleys fading with sorrow; the tomb is veiled with the darkness of the night. The poet says goodbye to Thompson and calls him the meek child of Nature, who lies under the shade of the trees. The gentle meadows blessed the poet and shall now mourn the premature death of Thompson. The people of the country, shepherds, boys, and girls shall decorate the grave with their hands. Then the grave will attract the eyes of the thoughtful people who will always remember Thompson and honor him as a Druid (that is, the real pioneer of Nature). The central idea of the poem is to remember the sad life of the poet's friend who will finally rest in the grave under the shade of the reeves. The poem is deeply sorrowful and melancholic and the poet's grief is genuine. Thus, one can see how far narrative the poem is. Though dominated by inanimate entities, these entities become agents actively performing actions.

Calling upon the lonely river to take him from the shores where the dead poet lies buried, Collins begins the process of personification. He goes on personifying elements of Nature as he mentions natural objects that are mourning the death of the poet. The river, meads, breeze, lawns, forest, hills, and valleys react to the death of Thompson. That is, Nature is presented as participating in the grief of the poet; Collins addresses Nature as an identical personality:

> But thou, lorn stream, whose sullen tide
> No sedges-crowned sisters now attend,
> Now waft me from the green hill's side
> Where cold turf hides the buried friend!
> And see the fairy valleys fade,
> Dun night has veiled the solemn view!
> --Yet once again dear parted shade
> Meek nature's child adieu. (lines 29-36)

Nature is a mother, whose elements mourn the death of her child. The stream has the power to respond to the poet's call to be taken away. The crowned water-nymphs will chide away. Although the image of the turf hiding Thompson is not necessarily a personification, but one feels that the turf is an active character that performs a deed intentionally, just like a real person. And the same is evident in the action of the 'night' that veiled the view. The 'fairy valleys' take part in the situation of mourning and fade away. The poet's sorrow is transformed into visual performance.

The poem has further cases of personification. The abstract concepts 'Love' and 'Pity' shed tears and mourn the death of Thompson: "Or tears, which love and pity shed/ That mourn beneath the gliding sail" (lines 23-4). The dead poet's eye is also personified as it scorns the pale shrine nearby (lines 25-6). Personified, 'Fancy' experiences death: "With him, sweet bard, may fancy die" (line 27). Similarly, "joy desert the blooming year" (line 28). The genial meads are agents involved in the activity of mourning; they "bless" and "mourn" (lines 37-8). In addition, stone and clay, usually emblematic of the lack of vitality, life, and emotional involvement, are activated and given a very vigorous emotional and patriotic attitude; they

will not only mourn Thompson's death but even force people to do so: "Long, long, the stone and pointed clay/ Shall melt the musing Briton's eye" (lines 41-2). Once again, the poem turns into a drama performed by inanimate subjects. Collins appears as an excellent painter of nature as he gives exact details of the scenes he describes. Because the poem is dominated by devotional feeling, personification enables the poet to present his experience of sadness in a very affective way, by which the most detached reader might share in the sorrowful activity. Personification of abstracts and of elements of Nature is a major characteristic in this poem, as also in most of Collins's poems, where he personifies Fancy, Friendship, Evening and the like. This gives his poems a magical touch as the personified concepts get met by the reader as lifelike characters, rather than poetical creations. Hence, Collins's personae are personified abstractions and inanimate entities which he employs to represent a distinctive poetic vision that refuses limitation. Collins's use of personified abstractions is part of his desire to elevate his personal experience, by which he may render his abstract passions concrete; that is, to define the indefinable and to turn the personal into a universal experience.

A similar attitude is evident in Balir's "The Grave". The title of the poem and the abundance of such words as 'horror', 'dread', 'dark', 'night', and 'silence' place the poet and his poem into the tradition of the gothic Graveyard poetry. In Blair's words: "In journeying thro' life;--the task be mine,/ To paint the gloomy horrors of the tomb" (lines 4-5); he finds joy in celebrating the distinctions of the grave: "Th' appointed place of rendezvous" (line 6). Blair meets and addresses the grave as an animate character, mighty and frightening, an act of gothic personification: "Thy succours I implore,/ Eternal King! whose potent arm sustains/ The keys of Hell and Death" (lines 7-9). Death, a frightening topic, is personified within a terrifying atmosphere: a dark, lonely, and silent place with frightening noise, doors that creep, windows that clap, the night's foul bird that screams loud, in addition to the fearful scene of 'gloomy aisles/ Black palster'd', and 'tattered coats of arms'. Stating his aim, the poet "makes one's blood run chill", a trajectory for which he recruits a gothic setting:

> Strange things, the neighbours say, have happen'd here;
> Wild shrieks have issued from the hollow tombs;
> Dead men have come again, and walk'd about;
> And the great bell has toll'd, unrung, untouch'd. (lines 50-53)

Clearly, Blair establishes the required atmosphere by his use of personification, transforming frightening mysterious notions into lifelike characters. Nature, the graveyard poets' beloved, is frightened by the horror of the grave: "Nature appall'd/ Shakes off her wonted firmness" (lines 10-11).

The personification never stops in the poem; the dark night is a character opposed to the supposed enemy or rival, the sun, which assumes the character of an infant: "and night, dark night,/ Dark as was chaos, ere the infant Sun/ Was roll'd together, or had tried his beams/ Athwart the gloom profound" (lines 13-6). Plants are also personified along with the introduction of supernatural *characters*:

> Well do I know thee by thy trusty yew,
> Cheerless, unsocial plant! that loves to dwell
> 'Midst skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms:
> Where light-heel'd ghosts, and visionary shades,
> Beneath the wan, cold moon (as fame reports)
> Embodied thick, perform their mystic rounds,
> No other merriment, dull tree! is thine. (lines 21-7)

The plant is *humanized* in a distasteful character that prefers to live (grow) among the graves and amidst the worms. The imagery of skulls and coffins is exaggerated as being the size of houses in order to strengthen the horror. Within such a context, the abstract and mysterious characters of 'ghosts' are personified along with 'visionary shades', and presented as frightening thieves and criminals who walk around at night. The wind poses as a frightening fierce enemy: "The wind is up:--hark!" (line 32). The need to be vigilant is emphasized by the reference to the feet of the frightening elements of Nature that move silently, as in the case of the hushed "foot of night" (line 42).

In fact, the whole poem is an extended personification with a major personified element which is the grave that is made a terrifying character which Blair addresses later as "Invidious" (line 85), making *it/him*

(the grave) an invader who destroys 'Friendship', this last a notion that occupies a position of centrality in graveyard poetry, and which ('Friendship') is also personified:

> Friendship! mysterious cement of the soul,
> Sweet'ner of life, and solder of society,
> I owe thee much. Thou hast deserv'd from me,
> Far, far beyond what I can ever pay.
> Oft have I prov'd the labours of thy love,
> And the warm efforts of the gentle heart (lines 88-93)

Unlike the other personified objects, 'Friendship' is the only charming agent and, like the diseased and mourned, is victimized in the process of dying and burial to be finally absented in the grave. In the end, it turns out that personification of the elements of Nature, and of abstract concepts, is a major aspect in the poem. Because the context of the poem is horror and gothic, the use of personification turns out to be a successful technique that enables the poet to frighten the readers who may visualize the personified elements. The poet turns the grave, wind, plants, ghosts, friendship, and many more, into real lifelike characters, by which fear is not described but rather acted and experienced first hand, the poem becoming, as stated above, a live-stage performance.

3. CONCLUSION: THE COGNITIVE ESSENCE OF PROSOPOPOEIA

Prosopopoeia, viewed here mainly as an attribute of poetry, assumes a connection with the field of cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguists attests that personification is an act of 'mapping' information from a 'source domain' onto a 'target domain,' because mapping is the outcome of a simultaneous conceptual and linguistic interaction and, therefore, prosopopoeia should be studied from the cognitive viewpoint (Hamilton, 428-9; Goodblatt and Glicksohn). As Raymond Gibbs asserted, a metaphor in language usually entails a related conceptual metaphor in thought (311). In other words, personification belongs to metaphorical discourse and is hence a product of thought rendered in speech. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argued that personification is a metaphor that "allows us to comprehend a wide variety of experiences with non-human entities in terms of human motivations, characteristics, and activities" (33). The success of the personified abstraction relies, at leas partly, on its ability to make a generalization. In fact, generalization for the eighteenth-century author, Bertrand Bronson pointed out, "was one of the chief ways in which man transcended his private experience and became adult" (147). And as Steven Knapp noticed, the eighteenth-century personification has a strong relation to affective experience (Knapp, the chapter on "Sublime Personification"). The matter is related to the poet's concern with the value of his poetic vision and his desire to concretely aestheticize personal experience. This in fact can be seen in the eighteenth-century poems in general and in the graveyard poetry, exemplified in the two poems studied here. To follow this eighteenth-century act of generalization, one may argue that the poets' use of personified abstraction is not a superficial technique of metaphorical language but a very distinctive style which entails an intellectual attitude, to accompany the over emphatically attached emotionality to poetry, in particular, and literature at large.

Joseph Frank contested that "modern aesthetic theory has evolved not from a set of fixed categories imposed on the work of art but from a relation between the work and *the conditions of human perception*. Aesthetic form and perceiving mind mutually implicate one another" (italics mine Frank 1991, 5ff.). One may underline here that the issue is grounded into disputes in the field of linguistics which lead to the rise of the so-called cognitive linguistics after the deconstruction of Aristotelian rhetoric in Jacques Derrida's "White Mythology," and the revision of Jacobsonian semiotics in Paul de Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric," along with his "The Epistemology of Metaphor" where he also criticized John Lock's 'idea-based' epistemology. As F. Elizabeth Hart asserted, "cognitive linguistics is entirely relevant to historical and literary analyses of culture. It gives us tools with which critics can -- to a degree unrealized by either New Critical or deconstructive methods -- demystify figurative language and thereby better describe its effects" (23). In fact, ever since the evolution of ancient philosophy and literary theory, definitions of poetry drew

analogies to the visual arts, whether in relation to studies of metaphorical language, of 'illustration', or ekphrasis, also called *et picture poesis* (Barkan, Bohn, Smoot, Panofsky 1939; Sypher; Gombrich 1971, 1972). Besides, emerging interdisciplinary approaches have ventured to offer a theoretical account for this issue by pursuing debate about the relation between word and image, interrelating speech and image-making, a matter central in the field of 'rhetoric' (Baxandall 1985, Alpers 1983, Wellek 1941, Mitchell 1994)). In other words prosopopoeia is an act of visualizing verbally in an attempt to render into human discourse aspects of human experience. Sir Philip Sidney's definition of poetry as "a speaking picture" that aims "to teach and delight" (483), is a clear poet's testimony on how poets attempt to turn their poetical creations into visual aspects. Even if Sidney's definition is associated with the dominant sixteenth-century genre of drama, it still hints at the discourse of visualizing that underlines an educational and delightful mission of literature, underscoring hence the cognitive aim of visualization in verse. The imaginative nature of prosopopoeia, to use Barkan's terminology, "embraces both eyes and ears, one that combines the discursive force of language with the sensuous power of real experience (figured as visual), one that unites doctrine with aesthetics (327).

In a much recent view, Roland Barthes asserted "the pleasure of verbal portraiture" (88), a pleasure Angela Cozea attaches to the verbal image that "commands the subject's thinking process" (213). Walter Benjamin's theory of "thing language," or "natural language" may cast the doubts of those who question the cognitive aspect of personification, or literary pictorialism at large. Benjamin proclaimed that "All expression, in so far as it is a communication of mental meaning, is to be classed as language. This mental being communicates itself in language and not through language. Language is the mental being of things" and "the word is simply the essence of things" (108, 112, 117). In other words, by naming things into words, the poets communicate their thoughts about the essence of the things they name, particularly when "[W]e are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages" (Benjamin, 122). Within such notion of live personification, the recipient may be involved into an intuitive cognition based on directly experiencing the personified. Amy Mandelker argued that "poetry constitutes thinking in images" and that "the contemplation of images facilitates the primary cognitive processes" (3). Within the same context, Marianne Shapiro discussed poetry's association with the visual arts and related that to a recurring theme in verse: "transformation of seemingly resistant material into expressive verbal form celebrates the power of words to encompass any other art," underlining the "synthesizing power of physical vision", whereby visual personification "encapsulate[s] the epistemologically ambivalent situation in poetry as a didactic source and a repository of information" (97, 103). Here one may draw a passing reference to the distinction between painting and poetic personification which is made clear in Lessing's *Laokoon*; in painting bodies the recipient gets only the visual effect whereas in poetic personification actions accompany portraiture: "Bodies with their visible properties are the true subjects of painting and actions the true subjects of poetry" (78). And this exactly is what Burke warned against: "merely as *naked* descriptions" which "convey so poor and insufficient an idea of the thing described" when Burke calls on the poet to "display rather the effect of things on the mind" (177, 180). Nonetheless, Gaston Bachelard has contributed persuasively to this field. His perception is based on a distinctive understanding of (poetic) language, an understanding he shares with Van den Berg. Insisting that "A great verse can have a great influence on the soul of language", and adopting den Berg's words, Bachelard attests "that things 'speak' to us and that, as a result of this fact, if we give this language its full value, we have a contact with things" (xxvii-xxviii). Language becomes the domain where the reader can live the pictorialized experience.

To conclude, there should be no question that 'vision' was a major preoccupation for eighteenth-century poets, a matter persuasively traced by Deborah Heller who asserted that "[I]t is no exaggeration to claim that British poets of the mid-eighteenth century were fascinated by the faculty of sight. Novel 'views' or 'prospects' could provide both diverting sense experience and, at the highest reaches, 'visions' upon which the Imagination might feed" (103). But it is to be stated that vision here transcends the issue of simplified bodily-eye sight to intellectual comprehension, the wider sense of 'sight'. That is, vision is a food for the imagination, by which the objects of sight, whether actually seen or made up imaginatively by the poet for the reader to see, are (to be) taken into the intellectual faculty to create, though perhaps a hyperreal experience, an opportunity to interact with the envisioned or personified. Collins and Blair, representative of the Graveyard poets and many more, recruit prosopopoeia to transform the intangible into something that can be sensed by the five acknowledged human senses, to be granted permission to enter into the mind where it is processed for the sake of intellectual comprehension, an understanding that also generates

feeling along with thought. In other words, the imagination of these poets, and of visualizing poets, is considered "primarily as a picture-receiving, picture-retaining, picture-building faculty, inseparably related to aesthetic response," and Joseph Addison continues, the images of the poet should become "pictures" (39). Consequently, such use of personified abstraction is rooted into an act of equating the poetic imagination with the intellectual picture-making process, whereby imagery becomes an essential constituent of poetry. Personified abstraction is 'an object of sight' but, once again, there is a distinction to be made between simple seeing and intellectual and analytical seeing. As David Fordyce pointed out, personification "may therefore be justly termed a particular Language, or Voca Painting, by which Things are delineated to us not in Show or Fiction merely, but according to their Realities and specific Natures" (qtd. in Wasserman, 5). In their use of the personified abstraction, poets produce poetry that seeks to concretize human visions and passions in a manner that is universally accessible. This technique reveals the creativity of the poets who attempted, Chester Chapin argued, to evoke images that do not have "any foundation in reality," particularly because "invention and imagination" are the "chief faculties of the poet" (45). That is to say, the cognitive is *essenced* into the personified. As they personify, poets do not write, nor write about nature, feeling, thought, and man. Rather, they become the means or ways through whom the experiences of nature, feeling, and thought communicate themselves. Above all, such cognitive nature of visual poetry may pave the way for inquiries about the overemphasized rift between the humanities and the sciences.

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