FEAR OF THE EMERGING FEMINIST AND SPINSTER-PHOBIA IN TUDOR ARGHEZI'S TABLETS FROM THE LAND OF KUTY

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Abstract: *The present article aims to demonstrate the visible connections and the similarities observable in the attitudes manifested by the representatives of British and Romanian modern literature regarding the reception of the New Woman concept, emphasizing the common initial tendency to satirize into submission and to lampoon the emergent Feminist movement, as demonstrated by contemporary research into the Victorian comic spirit. Tudor Arghezi's rendition of the variations and unavoidable changes operated on gender roles in Interwar Romania contains aspects that are similar to late Victorian male attitudes towards women's emancipation. The novel entitled* ***Tablets from the Land of Kuty*** *deploys the corrosive depictions of New Woman prototypes in Rabelaisian grotesque notes that are tributary to the literature of the absurd. Pragmatic text analysis reveals (post)modern traits in Arghezi's art of portraiture.*

Keywords: satire, lampoon, New Woman, Feminism, grotesque.

Several academics who focus their studies on Victorianism and its intricate, subversive and often encoded forms of satire have linked the various perspectives on feminism to the initial response of Victorian audiences and of the literary community to the emergence of the New Woman. Such studies on both satire with its various forms as well as on Otherness are collected in *The Victorian Comic Spirit*, edited by Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor (2000). According to Margaret D. Stetz, the author of the comprehensive study "The Laugh of the New Woman" published in *The Victorian Comic Spirit*,

> The outbursts of extreme malevolence that seemed to arise especially around the issues of gender roles and sexuality and that expressed itself through ridicule were hardly confined to England in this period. (232)

This statement not only poses a challenge, but subsequently proves to be unquestionably true: the comparative study of Victorian satire and that of the emergent, incredibly popular and poweful Romanian lampoon tradition developing during the last decades of the nineteenth century provides samples of certain similarities with regard to the targets of satirical treatment, especially in the press, focused as it was on politicians, social figures and their portrayal on the background of current events (*Universul* being the most popular, according to Pamfil Șeicaru's *History of the Press*). The present article focuses on the similarity of reception concerning the emergence of the New Woman, a movement that gained momentum in the 1880s and 1890s on British and American territory and whose echoes become visible in the first decades of the twentieth century in our country. *Contimporanul* (one of the most influential avant-garde Romanian publications of the interwar period) was a modern newspaper that was also tackling the subject of women's rights and feminism, which proves the presence of this issue in the public's conscience and area of interest. For example, the 33rd issue, published on the 3rd March

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1923, features a satirical attack against Liberal leader Ion Brătianu, the article stating that the feminist movement, although appreciated by the *Contimporanul* editing team, would surely not obtain the vote that year, due to the fact that Mr. Brătianu was regretting just having granted the universal vote to men, let alone women:

> The mirage of the constitution that is the subject of an ''ongoing debate" which will cease in a couple of days gives the ladies the illusion of an end-of-season bargain. The feminist ladies who will undoubtedly not gain any voting rights for women, will reproach themselves for having realised the opportunity too late ... We hereby make an unselfish gesture to the benefit of the feminist unity cause that we sympathize with, by announcing the women-fighters that all would have been in vain ... Or were the feminists really thinking that after the experience of the unversal voting law for men finally being passed, Mr. Brătianu would be interested in having yet another feather to his hat, namely that of the woman-peasant's rights?

Similarly, Tudor Arghezi's multiple articles, tablets and even novels touched on the subject several times; the recurrence of this theme treated with various degrees of satirical intensity is the reason why I chose to select my examples from *Tablets in the Land of Kuty*, bearing in mind that similar portraits also appear in the spinster figure that sporadically appears in his *Buna Vestire Cemetery*, most of these satirical portraits bearing the analysis in the light of Margaret Statz's above-quoted observation.

Before addressing the descriptive instances dedicated to the Spinster and Feminist prototypes – the use of the capital letter here being prompted the lack of names aimed at the universal nature of the said prototypes – one must consider Arghezi's overall view on the matter. His position is not completely black-and-white and his general attitudes towards women's emancipation cannot be decidedly pigeonholed to unquestionable misogyny. Politically speaking, he also proved a certain kind of ambivalence in his earlier years, until the point where he defined his convictions and decided to support only the socialist regime. Therefore, he had the same manner of considering the issue of women's emancipation from various perspectives; considering the impressive amount of articles and novels published throughout an interval of about seventy years of assiduous literary activity that even got him international acclaim, it is not surprising that the changes in Romanian society and especially the implementation of measures to emancipate women came to his attention, triggering feelings of appreciation as well as manifestations of disapproval. To start with the examples supporting his positive attitude towards the issue, he took sides with fellow writer Isabela Sadoveanu when she was lampooned by Dimitrie Anghel in *Flacăra* for having criticized some of his wife's writing. In this case that represents the theme of Arghezi's lampoon entitled *Moravuri literare* (translatable as *Literary Manners* and published in *Seara*, 12 June 1913), the author condemns the very aspect that he praises upon other occasions, namely home and the collaboration between husband and wife, as in the particular case of Anghel versus Sadoveanu, he feels that the literary quality and the polemics that ensued must be judged by the higher principles of critical concepts, irrespective of subjective considerations. This principle of the 'elegant lampoon and polemics' represents a thesis that Arghezi best explains in his critical analysis of the lampoon (see Arghezi, *Pamfletul* (*The Lampoon*), 1916, subsequently revisited in 1925, 1928, 1937). Furthermore, he continues the tradition of portraying the Beloved Woman as the centre of one's universe, using the most diverse and surprising imagery that creates a god-like, angelic and awe-inspiring woman similar to the prototype created by Mihai Eminescu in his first stages of writing on the theme of love. But, as shall be demonstrated in the lines to follow, Arghezi was also one to conduct the harshest

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attacks not only against independent, emerging feminists who he for some reason perceived as a threat, but also against the more vulnerable category of unmarried women who had not yet found their place in the largely patriarchal Romanian interwar society, as they were still afraid to take the determined stand of supporting feminism, but had failed to align themselves to married life or to fulfill the general expectations that the same society had of traditional women and their assigned gender roles. This attitude was similar to that of Victorian women who were shamed into submission by the ridicule constantly shed upon them in the British press of the 1880s and 1890s (Stetz, 232, in *The Victorian Comic Spirit*). But what exactly was it that so irked and even infuriated male writers in connection to New Women? Margaret D. Stetz explains in the same article that George Gissing, apparently a representative of late nineteenth century male intelligentsia, happily quoted and praised Dickens for portraying the New Women as an almost bawdy person, always dissatisfied with the commonsensical husband, always loud, aggressive and opinionated (Stetz, 222); Gissing goes so far as to proclaim atrocious violence against these women as rational (!) and even welcome it in his *Charles Dickens*:

> In the highways and by-ways of life, by the fireside, and in the bed-chamber, their voices shrill upon the terrified ear. It is difficult to believe that death can stifle them. (quoted in Stetz, 223).

Might this be the suppressed annoyance that made itself visible in Tudor Arghezi's treatment of the President, as shall be presented here, the irritation taking the form of violent, offensive language? And what is it that the author wanted to replace women's emancipation with, what female attitudes and roles are condoned by him in the first place? The analytical comparison of the portrait Arghezi made of young flower seller in *Lina* in 1942 on one side and the one of the President depicted in *Tablets from the Land of Kuty. Swiftian Stories*, in 1933 might present a possible answer. Both female characters share a love for independence and assert their rights in oppressive ways, but that is about all they have in common. Lina is portrayed at length in this eponymous, largely autobiographical novel of Arghezi's: a striking beauty coming from the most humble hut in the slums of Bucharest, who tries to make ends meet all by herself, a young orphan living out of selling flowers to the rich, decadent and corrupt high society that occupied the capital's city centre. So far, a hero in the making of realist extraction; but the plot plunges into deep, gross narrative exaggeration as the only remarkable thing Lina does throughout the book is literally kick-fight the men who make inappropriate advances on her, the author apparently relishing the blatantly unrealistic, unintended slap-stick effect of the bloodshed caused by teenager Lina in restaurants, streets, and even in the dungeon filled with the lowest of the low, all out to get her (see novel *Lina*, 657-658). For a writer as talented as Arghezi, it is a wonder how he failed to notice the ridiculousness and the immediate dismantling of the realistic mechanism he had built by means of the plot up to that point, as he prepares a temporary exit for the violent beauty who again beats up more than a hundred vicious prisoners (single-handedly!) the night she was jailed for having put a lewd banker into unconsciousness because of his unwanted, lascivious suggestions of them spending the night together (in *Lina*, 655). It is worth noticing that the courageous girl takes her time to deliver a melodramatic monologue in which she pities herself and trumpets her difficult, tragic role of lonesome heroine who strives to keep her innocence in a corrupt world. Had this point been made with more discretion, it might have remained convincing, but as the beautiful teenager gives the impression that all she thinks about is her purity, she loses most of her credibility and interest, remaining a flat character. What is more, the omniscient writer does nothing to redress this shortcoming: on the contrary, all he seems to write about in connection with Lina is her virginity and rather annoying, self-

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proclaimed modesty, which sounds in 1942 as artificial as the damsels-in-distress of Renaissance England, who would lament being locked by a predator for days or weeks on end instead of making the least amount of effort to escape their oppressor. All things considered, Lina disappears for the (lengthy) rest of the novel, where her place is taken by Ion Trestie, a male version of Lina, endlessly professing his own talent, purity, honesty, modesty, dedication, loyalty, etc. Critics maintain that Trestie is the closest character to Arghezi's autobiographical depiction of his youth, so it is not surprising that the young man becomes the hero, awed, loved and respected by everyone in the factory and most of all, by the modest Lina, who we learn had left Bucharest, disgusted by its immorality, seeking a place where she could be modest and sheltered from male attention. Finally, both young heroes find their greatest fulfillment in life by deciding to get married and stay humble, thus embracing traditional gender roles as the ultimate key to happiness, proving that this might be the author's ideal image of gender roles and of women per se.

At the far end on the spectrum of Arghezi's scale of values are the figures of female authority and female perceived as Otherness. To begin with, there is the ample portrait of the woman-president who rules over the Land of Kuty in *Tablets from the Land of Kuty*. Before analyzing the portrait itself, there are a few considerations to be made regarding the context of this novel. Presented by critic George Călinescu in *The History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present* as 'an enormous diatribe' whose 'core lies in the total acceptance of the absurd', 'endowing the lampoon with the fabulous atmosphere of Swift and of the utopian writers in general' (Călinescu, 817), it proves Arghezi's talent for satire in all its nuances and forms as well as his virtuosity in mastering the principles of the absurd. The novel stands out in Romanian literature as one of the best instances of fantastic prose, especially due to the fact that Arghezi embarked on a lengthy project with this novel, in contrast to the general trend of his contemporaries who were mostly choosing the short story or the poetic form for the absurd. The implausible plot has three pilots spontaneously flying to the Land of Kuty, one of them being the narrator. By completing this Swiftian journey, they discover a topsy-turvy world governed by illogical concepts in all its aspects, from education to politics and daily life. The country is led by a woman-president whose authority and wish for being in control in all situations make the visiting pilots adopt not only condescending, but even violent attitudes towards her (one of them swears at her without her realizing it), despite the fact that the President takes an active interest in their wellbeing and addresses them in a polite way. According to Romanian critic Nicolae Balotă, this tendency together with the telling dedication of the novel to François Rabelais is reflected in the ample use of the grotesque in his depiction of the President. To prove this point, I have translated the paragraph dealing with her physical description:

> The President's suit refused any age-related constraint, being subjected to anatomical knots and varicose veins, therefore being worn with the freedom of attire that would characterize a hallstand seen from behind that hastily receives all that is hanged on its pegs, propped by a wooden pole. Kuic could not take his mind off the boot, with its cracks from which the soles of the feet flooded their fat on the sides, bearing the appearance of caviar in the stomach of a carp that lay on its side. Apart from the massive, bulging shapes of the joints – anatomical growths like the soft digital roots that were meant to complete the prolonged metatarsus on the inside of the gait, comfortable for a more stable balance such as that of a pelican – the President's twisted, child-like legs had remained fifty years behind the cheek which was covered by an erectile nasal gland that was spreading out from between the eyebrows, reaching the smiling lips, bringing to mind a lupus with cauliflower sprouts; one noticed the Chinese obesity of these legs, as though her entire body, swelled up from the knees upwards like a deformed cactus, with the fruit of a

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> tousled pumpkin on its top, wearing a hat, would have grown suffocated, her heels in a plant pot. The fertile succulence of the nostrils made the use of the monumental handkerchief a laborious one. By displaying the shawl-like cloth and by taking it to her vocal nose (like a prestidigitator preparing a prank would), the President used to disturb the importance of her social and political role as well as the solemnity of the meetings, what with the caricature of a trombone. Thus, her solemn courtesy and her immense genealogical prestige found themselves periodically flawed, in a manner similar to a liturgy held in a cathedral that was interrupted by a dog bursting in, barking and chasing a cat. This was the actual and real portrait of the President, since for the press and for window-displays she made use of a reminiscent photo, a few decades old. … (*Tablets from the Land of Kuty. Swiftian Stories*, 870)

I have chosen to provide the translation of the lengthier version of the portrait in order for the reader to observe Arghezi's swift transfer from the physical and physiological to the psychological portrait of the President, starting the ample process of ridiculing her political persona and especially her overtly feminist thinking. Even the Romanian term he uses to identify her ('*Prezidenta*') is a sardonic form of the genderless word *Preşedinte* or the feminine form *Preşedintă*, the term of choice already bearing a negative connotation through its apparent mistaken linguistic transfer of the French to Romanian, suggesting ridicule pretentiousness. What the narrator cannot stand is the President's wish to detach herself from the traditional gender role of wife and mother, implying that a woman's wish to dominate a male-governed domain is unnatural, as was, to his mind, the alternative of not bearing children and not minding the household during one's entire life. Magda Răduţă talks about Arghezi's repugnance at anything hybrid, at the possibility to encounter unnatural juxtapositions, in her study entitled *'Nici mănuşi, nici milă. Trei pamfletari interbelici* (translatable as *'No Gloves, No Pity'. Three Interwar Lampoonists*):

> The essential category of the mistake, of the flaw that caused the crushing of the organs is related to Arghezi's entire vision of the matter he is working with: the intervention of the un-natural in the natural ways of the world. The universe of Arghezi's lampoons does not have a metaphorical content, nor does it contain any background abstractions; it is object-focused and solid, stemming from the most palpable physical dimension. His great themes belong to a natural philosophy of balance. (Răduţă, 42).

Given the fact that this attitude permeates Arghezi's lampoons as well as novels (*Buna Vestire Cemetery*, *The Black Gate*, *Wooden Icons*), one might conclude that the fear of contamination with the unnatural, nightmarish hybrid borders an obsession or a phobia that he attempts to purge by constantly providing instances of his definition of the natural while at the same time not being able to avoid obsessively thinking and writing in hyperbolized detail about the subject. The description of the President of the Land of Kuty is useful once again in proving this point, as the narrator indirectly transmits his unjustified abhorrence through the image of the cane replacing the human entity and by the sarcastic rendition of the President's supposed lack of motherhood instinct.

> Without undergoing any essential changes, like a cane that beneath the wear and tear of time maintains its expression and form, the President was from her youth destined to a calling of a collective character, much above the mediocre satisfactions and stillness of married life. As a wife distracted and animated by an ideal, she fulfilled the mandatory household duty and obligation, in the way a conductor would drive his tramway while smoking a cigar, mindful enough to honk and to shake the ashes away. (Arghezi, 871)

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To further enhance, clarify and influence the reader's response, Arghezi delves deeper into the absurd by making use of hyperbolic dimensions in his description of the unnatural body. According to Nicolae Balotă in *Opera lui Tudor Arghezi* (translatable as *Tudor Arghezi's Writings*),

> The grotesque corporality includes the obscene as well as the trivial. The representation of these degraded forms of the esthetical canon is proposed in contrast to spiritual resplendence. Like Rabelais or Céline, when overwhelmed by a descriptive rage aimed at esthetically demolishing a character, Arghezi makes use of a hyperbolizing form of art. He seems to lose sight of the initial satire, forgetting the true objective of his 'exaggeration'. We are actually witnessing a displacement of the portrait in the imaginary. The artist leaves behind the 'model' and as he projects his monsters, he forges the beings of a pure phantasmagoria by the continuous annihilation of the real. Therefore, the anatomy of the characters that form Arghezi's Satyricon is subjected to a form of attrition which transforms them in the strange ruins of a nightmarish humanity.' (Balotă, 330)

It is surprising to notice that although the target of his lampoon (the President) has actually conceded to society's expectations and, to a certain extent, to gender roles, as she actually did have a husband and children, the author still insists on degrading both her psychological and physical entity to the basest of forms, plunging into full-swing Rabelaisian hyperbole:

> The anatomy of the President, burdened by viscous bags and sacks of tallow, seemed to be doubly wrinkled around the navel, hanging like a goat's udder in the chest area, creating four layers under the chin and two rolls around the nape where the hair –curled and made to look like astrakhan – seemed dipped in oil. The President's soft parts, abundantly spread like some breasts grown from her spine, would reach as low as the back of her knees, giving her walk the absurd expression of dorsal maternity. (Arghezi, 872)

This paragraph brings to mind Flann O'Brien's hyperbolic depiction of Finn MacCool in *At Swim Two Birds*, with the difference that if the Irish writer's parody of Celtic Revival writing style has a well-defined and logical explanation (his satire being aimed at the excesses of the movement), Arghezi's reason for this lampooning frenzy remains aloof of any possible justification except that of an absurdist, grotesque tour de force. Considering the analysis made by Margaret Stetz on the vicious attacks against New Women in the British press of the 1880s and 1890s (George Gissing's attitudes being thoroughly analyzed and proving the point with regard to this attitude), it becomes apparent that the same attitude of 'shaming New Women into submission' (Stetz, 225, 232) might have animated Tudor Arghezi about fifty years later, despite the influences of social changes and despite women becoming much more visible in Romanian social and literary activity. After all, the only aspect that seems to drive the narrative voice round the bend is the fact that this middle aged mother and wife who happens to be the President manifests a will of her own and is acknowledged as a leader in her country, be it the absurd land of Kuty or not. The rest is authorial interpretation. His fulminating attacks against the President end with what is envisaged as the ultimate degradation: the gender change that plunges her into the depths of what the author defines as negative, hybrid otherness, the sex change being once again associated with the President's wish to be acknowledged and acclaimed in a male-dominated world:

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> In her own way, the President was an apostle who (in order to be an authentic apostle) would have needed an organ of a well-known form, even if not used, as it spares its owners from the periodicities that might be upsetting and bothersome in the *feminist propaganda* or in spreading constructive feelings among the ignorant and the poor. Being considerably associated with the official religious rite, she tried to turn it into an aggressive one, dreaming of becoming a *female patriarch* and teaching both clerics and believers some novelties that they had ignored for hundreds and hundreds of years. (Arghezi, 874-875, my underlining in the translated excerpt)

The President's portrait stands for Arghezi's apparent rejection of feminism, while the depiction of her young secretary represents his violent, bawdy reaction towards unmarried women, an attitude that presents elements of a simulated phobia. The secretary's image is alternated with and attached to the political leader, thus receiving the same harsh, bitterly sarcastic treatment. She too is viciously mocked for her looks and physicality that does not escape the scatological treatment. She too is articulate in speech as we see her conversing with one of the pilots that initially pretends to be interested in her. The psychological and social traits which are mostly lampooned in her case reside in the fact that she is not married but wishes it and the blame that she does not make herself attractive enough for suitors. The last reproach is another recurrent issue with Arghezi, both in certain newspaper articles that advise women how to behave towards their husbands (submissively would be the key word here) and again in *Lina*, where the author gratuitously dedicates quite a few pages of scatological content that would make Rabelais and Léon Bloy jealous, purely to describe the disgusting appearance of a young man who worked at the factory where the 'golden couple' formed by Lina and Ion Trestie were employed (see *Lina*, 819). The secretary is described more concisely than the President, associated with forms of negative sensory perception, permanently overshadowed by her employer. When he insists on the modest means of the younger woman, Arghezi almost fails in his persistent attempt to disgust the reader by (perhaps) unconsciously creating the aura of a victim for her character, due to her coerced dependence on the overbearing President and to her modest financial means suggested by her appearance, epitome of the underdog:

> Once the President walked in, Kuic was struck by the odour of a butcher's shop that also contained a cheese counter and some barrels of pickles and borsch on the side. By comparison, the secretary alone could represent an alpine landscape that was left in a barber's shop by a client who enjoyed pastel paintings. Her hairdo, reminiscent of a wig and split by the parting, together with the knitted bonnet, covered the expression of ineluctable sadness and bitterness characterizing the inquisitive, critical spirit in the service of obedience. The young lady had a degree in law, in the sense of the French term *ancienne*. (Arghezi, 872)

It is not the single instance where Arghezi professes his exaggerated and unexplainable disdain for women intellectuals, as in *Buna-Vestire Cemetery*, published in1936 he almost recreates the secretary in the form of a young intellectual who was respected in the literary and academic world but who could not find a male partner despite her attempts to conquer a suitor and in spite of her high connections in the world of academics. The recurrent character of the Spinster travels from one novel to another, maintaining its essence almost intact:

> Abstract Idyll: In a window nook, Kuic was chatting with the maiden-secretary who was confessing her deepest thoughts. Her wrinkled suit and the blackness of her nails stood as proof of intellectual pursuits in her activity as well as of a regrettable lack of time for her hygiene. The secretary belonged to the President as to an elderly person who craves to gnaw at the liveliness of

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> youth, paying her with as little as possible, so that the anemic, ghostly wanness would maintain itself beyond the cadaver shade of pale violet and so that the skin wouldn't fall off the bones. She would have gladly evaded from Kuty, carried away by a plane towards a faraway country. Her eyes revealed the evidence of this ideal, but none of us was romantic enough to burden ourselves with a maiden that Kuic, in his lack of tactfulness, would call ''old man'' (Arghezi, 871, 872,875).

Taking everything into account, the auctorial intention becomes evident in *Tablets from the Land of Kuty* as the two portraits analyzed above are followed by the chapter entitled *The Kuty Woman*, which points out the futility of intellectual and social emancipation in a world where

> The woman was treated like an animal in Kuty and like all animals, had no rights … The woman only had the right to waste her own husband's fortune, while she was married, or at most that of a close friend's husband as well as that of the sugar daddy's, provided that the woman in question was a singer or an actress … The woman did not have the right to vote deputies, nor was she allowed to be a minister or a corporal; she was not entitled to wear trousers, frock-coats or spurs; she was not allowed to talk in a hoarse voice or to shave … The hunchback informed us about the lengthy debates around the President's action and the mostly male adversaries of her endeavor, which was called in Kuty *(with obscene intent) the 'feminist movement'*, as it implied, according to the local philosophers, a certain kind of ardor. (Arghezi, 877, my underlining in the translated excerpt).

Could this be a prefiguring instance of postmodernist, light treatment of what modernists considered serious subjects, nothing more than lighthearted, unbiased literature of the absurd? Perhaps. But when Arghezi wrote *Zmeul turcesc* (translatable as *The Turkish Kite*) for *Adevărul literar şi artistic* on the 5th November 1933, the lampoon transmits the auctorial intention in a more direct and assumed manner than the problematic narrator of Kuty. I will assume responsibility for the risk of over-quoting, as the best conclusion for the purpose of my article lies within these witty, but bitterly satirical pages:

> Mrs. or Miss is making a Turkish kite for herself: a magazine, a gazette … Ms. dabbles in journalism, or could have even dealt in poetry: but what she really has is a calling for the political, … for the social and feminist. Quite a few brigades of madams well over their years of beauty, of questionable freshness and youth, have decided not to take care of dogs or even cats anymore, especially not tomcats of any kind; they will no longer have canaries in cages, nor will they paint pastels. What then? What they have decided to do is spare the beautiful girls and ladies by getting them rid of all that these spry Eves like the most, namely men, lovers, bathing and dancing … (Arghezi, quoted in Pamflete, 239-240).

Note: given the fact that my research has not come across any English translations as yet, all the fragments quoted from Tudor Arghezi, Nicolae Balotă and Magda Răduţă were made by myself from the versions in the Bibliography.

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