Suspending the Ego: the Experience of Prison in Tudor Arghezi's *Flori de mucigai*

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Key-words: *Tudor Arghezi, poet-narrator, experience of prison, anti-art, multiplicity of voices*

To publish a study of Tudor Arghezi's poetry at such a time might seem to some unduly perverse, since interest in the work of the man who became, hardly of his own volition, Poet Laureate of Socialist Romania, has declined substantially in the era of pre- and post-revolutionary Postmodernism. Fewer and fewer studies are being dedicated to his poetry and prose, a natural consequence perhaps of the surfeit of critical writings, some of them little more than mandatory eulogies, published in the 1960s and 1970s, and his place in the literary canon is accordingly much diminished. And yet it may be recalled that the reputation of a poet of Dante's magnitude fell into decline for more than two centuries during the Renaissance and the Reformation, only to emerge once more in a blaze of glory that continues to dazzle even his would-be detractors.

We should also remember that Eugen Ionescu and Mircea Eliade, both of whom vehemently disparaged Arghezi's poetry in the 1930s, many years later acknowledged their poor judgment. Ionescu did so in this rare tribute:

> Tudor Arghezi is without doubt the greatest Romanian poet after Eminescu... [he] had the good luck to steer clear of the "modernism-traditionalism" dilemma. This is also the reason why he managed to remain faithful to himself and, as a consequence, to become a poet of universal value (Ionesco, 1946: 22–26).

Eliade, in turn, made handsome amends for his early negativism: "Literary critics unanimously agree that Tudor Arghezi is the greatest Romanian poet of this century and ranks among the most original European poets of our time"[1]. If we were to discuss Arghezi in the context of Modernity, perhaps Marcel Cornis-Pope comes closest to the truth when he notes that

> the two models praised by *Integral* were Arghezi and Brâncuşi, artists which, like Eliot, had "modernized themselves on their own", without allegiance to any "school in fashion" (Cornis-Pope 1996: 107).

[1]These are comments that Eliade made, when acting as an outside consultant for the Princeton University Press. They are published on the cover of *Selected Poems of Tudor Arghezi* (Princeton, N.J., 1976), translations by Michael Impey and Brian Swann.

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For Tudor Arghezi was not only the outstanding Romanian poet of the first half of the twentieth century, but he was also a prose writer, polemicist and journalist of great distinction and power. While it may be hard for Romanians, embroiled as they are in their own late surrealist squabbles, to concede him today the poetic autonomy he once enjoyed, perhaps the extraordinary diversity of his writings, the remarkable fusion of *poesis* with non-fictional, even expository elements, and the juxtaposition of the historical with the mythical and the biblical, may yet keep the door open for informed appreciation.

The critical response to Tudor Arghezi's *Flori de mucigai* was overwhelmingly favorable, both in Romania and elsewhere (Arghezi 1931)[2]. The few negative comments to surface were spurred either by wounded vanity or by the moral outrage of Iorgu's acolytes and the tub-thumpers of literary fundamentalism. Other critics, more generous in spirit, praised the brilliance of Arghezi's metaphors, often comparing his lyrical outbursts to similar effects achieved by Garcia Lorca or Salvatore di Giacomo (Călinescu 1939: 35, Haggqvist 1968: 72–73, Luc-André 1963: 1950–1951). They commented on the wide variety of poetic styles and techniques he employs and speculated whether the influence of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* extends beyond nomenclature.

A number of post-war critics, on the other hand, Ovidiu Crohmălniceanu (1960) and Dumitru Micu (1965) among others, attempted to link *Flori de mucigai* to the *aesthetics of ugliness* (or, as we would prefer, an aesthetics of beauty born of ugliness) first enunciated by Arghezi in *Testament*, the poem he originally wrote as an afterword to *Cuvinte potrivite:* „Din bube, mucegaiuri şi noroi/ Iscat-am frumuseți şi prețuri noi" [From boils, mildew and dirt/ I've brought forth new beauties and values][3]. Micu, in particular, stressed Arghezi's sympathies for „aceşti eroi,/ Călăi, iobagi, apostoli" [these heroes,/ Hangmen, serfs and apostles] that advance „din noapte pân' la mine" [from night up to me] – in *Rugă de vecernie* (Arghezi 1959: 103–104). It is true that in the preface to a volume of translations from the poetry of François Villon, Arghezi refers directly to his own detention at Văcărești after the First World War, and the „simpatie amplificată" [redoubled sympathy] he expressed for his „fostul coleg, de acum cinci sute de ani, cetățean, bandit şi poet" [former colleague, of five hundred years before, citizen, highwayman and poet] also appears to embrace some if not all the inmates whose wretched fate he shared (Villon 1956: 6). It is also true that the volume of prose sketches and portraits *Poarta neagră* (1930) at times appears to deal directly with his prison experiences (Arghezi 1930b). But of direct, autobiographical experience, there is little or no evidence in *Flori de mucigai*, poems almost all of which were written immediately after the two years of his incarceration (1918–20). Indeed, in the prefatory poem that provides the title for the volume, Arghezi takes pains to caution his readers against jumping to unwarranted conclusions. His „stihuri" may be verses of the pit, the living hell of prison: unaided by divine inspiration, they may have been written „cu unghiile de la mâna stângă" [with the nails of my left hand] in a gesture of defiance more artistic than demonic, but they are also „stihuri fără an"

[2] All the citations from this cycle, however, are taken from Arghezi 1959.
[3] Arghezi 1927; see Arghezi 1959: 20.

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[verses for all seasons], verses not limited to one moment in time, but repeated in perpetuity, or at any rate repeated up to the fictive moment of universal extinction that occurs in the original concluding poem *Ceasul de-apoi*.

That Nicolae Balotă offers an unusual and provocative reading of Arghezi's second published cycle of poems is clear from the title („Noaptea valpurgică a *Florilor de mucigai*" [The Walpurgisian Night of *Flowers of Mildew*]) he gives to this chapter of his book (Balotă 1979)[4]. His argument seems to be that in the absence of a spiritual transfiguration that is characteristic, at least in potential, of *Cuvinte potrivite*, there must be a demonic presence. But, apart from the one allusion to the poet-persona writing with the nails of his left hand, where is the evidence for such a presence? Later attempts by Balotă, as we shall see, to link this one refusal of divine power – that also accentuates a moment of individual determination („Şi m-am silit..." [And I forced myself]) – to a *Walpurgisnacht*, or a *Sabbat*, or a Black Liturgy, seem to strain credibility beyond all reasonable limits. Balotă further argues that by contravening what he calls the aesthetics of transfiguration *Flori de mucigai* as a cycle represents an adhesion to an aesthetics of unmasking (*demascării*), by which he seems to mean a stripping away of layers of hypocrisy and the reduction of poetry to its essence. Seen in this light, Arghezi's poetry – in Balotă's view – becomes a kind of iconoclastic avantgarde, which is anti-lyrical, anti-romantic, and anti-purist in nature. The values it proclaims are those that subvert the canon of good taste and *il bello scrivere*: the ugly, grotesque, monstrous, trivial, macabre, and the atrocious (Balotă 1979: 216).

Balotă's argument in favor of an anti-art aesthetics is a powerful one (Balotă 1979: 217), and he backs it up in subsequent passages by underlining other components: „renunţarea la *har*", „absenţa sacrului", the renunciation of revelation and inspiration, and, above all, „profanizare... a lirismului" [profaning lyricism]. Balotă builds his case with such skill and in such detail that at some point it is necessary to interrupt his pleading, still the flow of oratory, and offer what contrary evidence there might be. Two immediate counter-arguments spring to mind: 1) the absence of lyricism is more than compensated for by the *participation* of the poetic voice in the vicissitudes of this prison underworld; and 2) the poetic process of subversion (to which Balotă frequently alludes) has the unexpected effect of unleashing "metaphorical outbursts of such brilliance that we can scarcely find their equivalents in European literature" (Haggqvist 1968: 72–73). As the "lonely psalmist" in *Cuvinte potrivite*, Arghezi is forever juggling the analogical possibilities of words rather than allowing his mind to expand visually. Through a process of distillation he finally arrives at the natural image, which is the "objective correlative" of his interior vision. But, as the interpreter and transmitter of collective suffering in *Flori de mucigai*, he discards ambiguity and starts with the concrete

[4] All citations in the text are to this edition. At a time when we had limited contact with critical studies published in Romania, we gave a lecture (May 1981) on *Flori de mucigai* at the Instituto Neolatine (Universitá di Padova), unaware that Balotă had meantime published his significant and comprehensive assessment of Arghezi's prose and poetry. While we appreciate immensely Balotă's approach, differences of opinion remain, as this study will reveal. Our lecture was then published as Impey 1994: 857–872.

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image, only to open up amazing perspectives and invite secret new intuitions in the mind of his readers.

In our opinion it is the function and nature of the narrative voice that provides the key to an understanding of Arghezi's cycle of the damned. From his own perspective, Balotă seems to agree: „Poziția Naratorului pe care o ia poetul în *Flori de mucigai* elimină confesiunea lirică. Prezența sa este aceea a unui cronicar al infernaliilor" [The narrative position adopted by the poet in *Flori de mucigai* excludes a confessional approach....The narrator's presence is rather that of a chronicler of different kinds of hell] (Balotă 1979: 218). Surely it is a substantial misreading of the cycle to argue that the poetic voice approximates that of a chronicler of the infernal; the presentation is rather that of a *multiplicity* of voices, among whom the poet's own may at times be discerned – though barely, so absolute is Arghezi's mastery of the modernist technique of self-effacement. Equally, although there can be no question of lyrical confession, such a technique does not prevent the operation of embryonic bonds of sympathy and awareness in a new fictional framework. While the poet's role in *Testament* is *apparently* limited to transforming the consciousness of his forefathers into words, where he is the master craftsman who from the primitive speech patterns of shepherds and plowmen fashions *cuvinte potrivite*, in *Flori de mucigai* he is drawing on shared experience at a deeper level, the actual experience of prison life. Cesare Pavese – whose poetry exhibits a similar concern for man's communal relationships – seemed to be referring to similar pre-conceptual levels of activity when he wrote that

> il primo fondamento della poesia è l'oscura coscienza del valore dei rapporti, quelli biologici magari, che già vivono una larvale vita d'immagine nella coscienza pre-poetica [the fundamental basis of poetry may be a subconscious awareness of the importance of those bonds of sympathy, those biological vagaries, that are already alive in embryonic form, in the poet's imagination, before he begins work on the poem] (Pavese 1967: 12; English version: Murch 1972: 27).

As an expression of shared sympathy for human suffering, *Flori de mucigai* is in direct line of succession from Villon's "testaments" to Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*. Only to this extent does the aesthetics of ugliness apply to *Flori de mucigai*. Ties of kinship with Baudelaire's world of vagabonds, beggars and fallen women clearly operate, but to suggest, as Crohmălniceanu did, that the composition of *Flori de mucigai* was dictated by "a violent aversion to bourgeois society" gives this series of poems a historical function Arghezi never intended. This is not to say, however, that Arghezi in his preface to the Villon translations referred to before does not roundly condemn a system of unequal justice that penalizes the fringe elements of society but lets the rich and powerful go scot free. With the exception of the frame poem, however, Arghezi never speaks directly in his own voice. He employs a narrative device similar to Giovanni Verga's *chorality of voices* in the novel *I Malavoglia*: each protagonist is presented from within the prison walls, from the point of view of those who share the same mindless routine or endure similar afflictions. The technique of the *volte-face* is prevalent, more than once we are lulled into sympathizing with a prisoner, only for the record to be set straight at the end of the poem in the most matter of fact way, as though it were the collective wisdom of

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the prison infrastructure that decided where the blame lay and why. At times, the narrative voice adds such refined commentaries that it would be a mistake to ascribe them directly to an inarticulate herdsman or gypsy. The voice here is Arghezi's, but the voice of Arghezi the prisoner, interpreting the experience of suffering for his illiterate companions.

This multiplicity or chorality of voices may be illustrated in the three poems that follow the title poem *Flori de mucigai*. Arghezi also adopts a framing technique, in many ways similar to the *cornice* in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, that allows him the privilege of directing our attention to extrinsic issues, principally aesthetic considerations, while, at the same time, conceding fictional independence (à la Pirandello), and thus authenticity, to the protagonists of this *House of the Dead*[5]. The first poem within the frame, *Pui de găi...,*the second in chronological order, is a lengthy narrative of foiled robbery and mistaken carnage; the second, *Cina*, which may be read, as Balotă does, as a parody of the Last Supper, combines a moment of prison life with a comment: „Totuna-i ce faci:/ Sau culci pe bogați, sau scoli pe săraci" [Whatever you do, it's all one:/ Trampling the rich or raising the poor] that might come from any member of the toiling chain-gang; the third, *Streche*, begins as a cry of anguish in the first person only to dissolve into a series of hallucinatory images. At first, unless suitably forewarned, the reader is likely to assume that it is the poet himself who speaks directly in these three poems, merely varying his voice and style of delivery to suit the individual circumstance. But *Streche* ends unexpectedly with this cryptic statement: „Pătru Marin, flăcău/ De subt Ceahlău/ Mai are/ Zece ani de închisoare" [In his prime, Peter Marin / From Mount Ceahlău,/ Still has/ Ten years to serve]. Suddenly, we are faced with the task of deciding who is speaking, and to whom. The problem of poetic voice, perhaps the major issue of twentieth-century poetry, has crept unawares into the body of Arghezi's text, this series of poems written for the most part between 1918 and 1923. Arghezi is not chronologically the first Romanian to exploit multiple viewpoints in poetry – Tristan Tzara, after all, had been experimenting along similar lines since 1913 – but he is in effect the true innovator, since Tzara's *Primele poeme* were not published until much later, and even then their striking originality was largely ignored in Romania (Tzara 1934).

Once the reader realizes that Arghezi is employing a multiplicity of voices in *Flori de mucigai*, the first two poems within the frame acquire vaster dimensions. Only now do we understand that *Pui de găi* is a fable or a myth, recreated from within, and recited by one or more of the prisoners, and that the last stanza of the poem:

> Baba miorlăie acum după fată-n închisoare,/ Şi hoațele de la femei o scuipă şi o târnuie./ Tâlharii taie-n ocnă sare,/ Şi capul lor cârciumarul Cîrnu e [The old hag whimpers/ For her daughter in prison/ And the thieving women prisoners/ Spit on her and punch her./ The robbers cut salt in the mine,/ And their chief is none other/ Than Cârnu].

The innkeeper, in a typically Arghezian reversal or volte-face, places the action of the narration in its proper context. This volte-face technique may be observed in nine of the first seventeen frame poems, the highest proportion by far of

[5] Of interest in this respect is the preface Arghezi wrote for *Amintiri din casa morților* (București, Alcalay, 1912), the Romanian translation of F. Dostoievsky's prison journal.

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any of Arghezi's cycles of poetry. It might be noted that this is a technique found in some of Arghezi's most successful poems, for example, in the celebrated *Testament* and *Vraciul* from *Cuvinte potrivite*, where in each case the poem ends on a moment of ambiguity and the poetic voice is forced to concede that the limitations of art are those of its own making.

Nicolae Balotă also takes note of this narrative device – which he calls the technique of the *poantă* – and recognizes its multiple significance (Balotă 1979: 237). If we may attempt to summarize his position, a „poantă" may sometimes reflect a rather didactic, moral note – „o morală din care nu lipseşte surâsul complice, aluzia sarcastică sau umoristică" [a moral twist by no means devoid of a smile of complicity, or a sarcastic or humorous allusion], or capture „un sens caligrafic, ca al unui vechi *envoi*" [a calligraphic meaning, like that of an old *envoi*]. More often, however, „poanta constituie o *surpriză*, relevarea bruscă a unui sens, a unui tâlc, răsturnarea celor enunțate anterior" [the *poantă* constitutes a *surprise*, the sudden revelation of meaning, of a parable or a joke, the reversal of everything stated before]. All of these meanings seem appropriate, although only the idea of a *răsturnare* conveys something of the categorical peremptoriness that we have referred to. It is Balotă's next observation with which we have to disagree:

> Prin intervenția vocii poetului-narator, ca a unui *raisonneur*, surpriza pe care o rezervă lectorului-ascultor, poate să însemne o lămurire finală ori o sentință neaşteptată [Through the intervention of the poet-narrator's voice, like that of a *raisonneur*, the surprise that is reserved for the reader-listener, may occasion a definitive explanation, or an unexpected judgment] (Balotă 1979: 237).

Balotă's observations are precise, entirely apposite, but he begs the question of poetic voice. Whose voice is represented here, in the fictive framework of these poems, that of the poet-narrator *raisonneur*, or that of an unknown, or at least unidentified, narrator, who sometimes speaks for him or herself, or in behalf of a larger group? And behind this narrative voice, other voices, a succession of voices, alternatively blending and distinguishing themselves, that form part of the prison infrastructure, voices that the former prison-inmate, now standing outside the frame, both temporally and spatially – as he must if he wishes to capture these events in poetry – desperately inscribes on the prison walls of his memory, at times interprets, other times allows to emerge unedited, with all their original power, voices perhaps cliché-ridden, full of street-wise talk, poorly articulated, but anguished, scornful, mocking, and ever knowing, to which he adds his own refinements and subtleties, pointing up contrasts, juxtaposing, reducing discursiveness to its quintessence, but always as one of a number, as a member of that chorus of voices, as a participant in that drama of collective misery.

For Balotă, one of the most effective *poant* is in *Candori*, „acea răsturnare a imaginii puşcăriaşului pios care se suprapune peste o altă imagine a aceluiaşi, scandaloasă" [that overturning of the image of a pious inmate that is superimposed over another, scandalous image of the same person] (Balotă 1979: 237). In the economy of the poem, Balotă adds,

> imaginea a doua exercită brusc un efect recurent asupra celei dintâi, imaginea turpitudinei fiind cea care, de fapt, se suprapune peste cea dintâi, a candorii [the

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> second image abruptly exercises a recurrent effect on the first one, the image of turpitude, in fact, being the one that is superimposed on the first image, that of purity and candour] (Balotă 1979: 237–238).

But is *super-impose* really the right word? The „poantă" or volte-face certainly questions the validity of the fiction of piety, but it does not undermine the structure or the intensity of that fiction; rather, it intensifies it. Arghezi delights in contrasting the saintly, devout figure with the actual thief and murderer lurking beneath canonical robes. This portrait of an apparent religious zealot is lovingly drawn with all the fastidious refinement of the artist-craftsman whose deft sketches of ecclesiastical life appeared in *Icoane de lemn* (1930), only that there the pervasive hypocrisy of the holier-than-thous was the target of the poet's satire. In this poem, on the other hand, there is no overt censure; the record is set straight in a manner that brooks no interference. And the poet here, as in other poems, seems content to stand shoulder to shoulder with his fellow prisoners in admiration of an accomplished trickster. A vision of human ingenuity in difficult circumstances that would have delighted the eye of Boccaccio! But there is more! Balotă does not allow for man's intrinsically dualistic nature. Who can say with any certainty that this man is a saint, whereas that one is a moral reprobate or a coward? Arghezi himself avoids passing judgment in this cycle of poems by conceding his prerogatives as a writer to the characters he has invented or brought to life. In his preface to the translations of Villon's poetry, however, he recalls his own experiences as a prisoner at Văcăreşti, not to exculpate himself, or even the other prisoners whom he concedes may very well have been violent or criminally insane people on the outside. He merely underlines the fact that even the most violent are capable of extraordinary tenderness and compassion for others, especially those creatures weaker or more innocent than themselves, and he cites several instances in which hardened criminals are moved to tears by the injury or death of a bird they had befriended or had been tending.

Balotă would have us believe that the perverse talents of the skillfully mendacious, the charlatans and travelling magicians of this world, exercised a powerful attraction on the poet's mind. Lache, the protagonist of the poem of the same name, is – according to Balotă – an alter-ego of the conjurer-illusionist of the „mahala", a master of black magic, whose art is „o parodie a creației din care nu lipseşte nici vraja, nici înşelătoria, nici taina unei demonii derizorii" [a parody of those creative powers we find in witchcraft, fraud, and the guile of a sneering demon] (Balotă 1979: 241). Society, Balotă says, does not forgive an artist who smacks of being a trickster. Once again, we might turn to Boccaccio's *Decameron* for a different view; there the narrator's sympathies are not with the gullible and the cheated, but rather with those whose talents and histrionic skills allowed them to hoodwink their fellow human beings, sometimes carrying their powers of deception to a form of high art that two centuries later Ariosto would famously exploit in the *Orlando furioso*.

But who are these inmates, these poor unfortunates, whom Arghezi permits to rise above the pack of other sinners, much in the same way that Dante allows his exemplary shades in Hell to snatch back, if only for a moment, a semblance of their former selves? Balotă's view is harsh, almost censorious:

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> Ceea ce demască poetul în *Flori de mucigai* este o condiție a omului ca *rob*. Nu numai cel întemnițat, ci şi insul liber robit de patimă, pradă slăbiciunilor este redus la sclavie. Nu este libertate în această lume a tenebrelor [What the poet unmasks in *Flori de mucigai* is man's condition as a slave. Not only is the prisoner but also the free man enslaved by passion, a prey to his weaknesses, reduced to slavery] (Balotă 1979: 239).

But we should not forget that these imaginary recreations take place in a prison, not the infernal regions envisaged by Virgil or Dante. Certainly, there is no liberty in a practical sense, but there is life, if only in the form of crude, raw emotions. Balotă's characterization of the human condition in Arghezi's poetry as enslavement contrasts sharply with Giacomo Leopardi's hymn of praise to human magnanimity, generosity and courage. But the Italian writer in some measure anticipates Nietsche's Superman, while Arghezi's focus is on the forgotten, dispossessed, humiliated, sometimes sin and vice-ridden humanity, that attracted the attention of many writers (Silone, Steinbeck, etc.) in the thirties. Even so, Balotă presumes too much when he places all the protagonists of *Flori de mucigai* on the same plane. Even if the thieves, swindlers, murderers, and strumpets owe their fate to the slavery of the senses, they are clearly motivated differently than is, for example, Ion in *Ion Ion*. Can one really equate the frenzied acts of violence characteristic of a peasant uprising (whose initial motivation was a desire for justice) with the wanton violence done to person and property in the name of greed and self-aggrandizement? Balotă, surely, would agree that this is not the case. The problem is that, once exceptions to the general rule are made, the foundations (in this case of a theoretical position that reduces Arghezi's protagonists to slave status) start to shift and the whole structure is in imminent danger of collapse.

The humanity of *Flori de mucigai*, Balotă argues, is that of a peripheral kind:

> Niciodată aceste patimi ale omului exclus, ostracizat din corpul omenirii nu se ridică la nobila demnitate a tragediei, dar în viziunea arghezian o stranie lumină aureolează pe alocuri creştetele acestor robi [Never are these sufferings of a man excluded and ostracized by his fellow men raised to the noble dignity of a tragedy, but in Arghezi's vision a strange light bathes here and there the tops of the heads of these slaves] (Balotă 1979: 239).

Thieves (*Cina*), whores (*Tinca*), murderers (*Candori*), the homeless (*Şatra*), and the crippled (*Sfântul*) „sunt *aleşii* poetului" [are *the chosen ones* of the poet]. But why should such basic human passions attain the noble dignity of tragedy? And Arghezi's *chosen*, exemplars of a suffering but ostracized and peripheral humanity, anti-heroes for Balotă, unexpectedly anticipate contemporary obsessions with marginality and alterity. How strange if it should be demonstrated that Arghezi, despite all the sins that seem to have been visited on him in recent years, is (or, at any rate, was) a prototypal postmodernist!

The figure of the androgyne, Arghezi's *Fătălăul*, whom Balotă pointedly includes, along with Hialmar, the gypsy cripple in *Sfântul*, on his list of *monsters*, would today, at scholarly meetings in most capital cities of the Western world, excite animated learned discussion. He would undoubtedly become an adopted brother (or sister), as one of the *included*, about whom our „PC" dominated culture would not permit one unkind word. But what does Arghezi exactly say?

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> Cu vreo câteva tuleie,/ Mă, tu semeni a femeie./ La sprinceană/ Fetişcană,/ Subsuoară/ De fecioară. [With the downy hair you have,/ Man, you're like a woman,/ Eyebrows/ Like a teeny-bopper,/ Armpits/ Of a virgin].

Like Arghezi, there can be few of us who have not met fellow beings whose sexual orientation is problematic; most of the latter are ordinary, harmless people whose physical appearance is unlikely to arouse such an incantatory panegyric. One thing is certain, the volte-face to this portrait of a penitenciary Adonis is more ironic than some we have considered; after constructing, tongue-in-cheek, the mytho-poetic origins of this Arghezian hermaphrodite:

> O fi fost mă-ta vioară,/ Trestie sau căprioară / Şi-o fi prins în pântec plod / De strigoi de voevod? [What were you, man, a violin, / A thin reed or a deer / Were you a germ in someone's belly / Of a ghost of a prince?].

the familiar rejoinder is devastating: „Din atâta-mpărechiere şi împreunare,/ Tu ai ieşit tâlhar de drumul mare./ Na! ține o țigare" [From such a coupling, / You came out a highwayman./ Hey, wanna fag?]. In Arghezi's fictive presentation, however, the transformation from legendary suckling to highwayman takes place in the minds of the prisoners themselves. Arghezi's self-appointed role is merely to give artistic expression to their creation, and this he does with great aplomb.

All along, Balotă has insisted that *Flori de mucigai* is a „Poezie a damnării" [a poetry of damnation], but not, as would be the case with so many "modern" poets (Blake, Poe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud are the ones he cites), a poetry „a unui poet damnat" [of a damned poet] (Balotă 1979: 219). Despite his imprisonment at Văcăreşti, where „a cunoscut bolgiile de dincolo de «poarta neagră» a temniței" [where he experienced the bolgias beyond the Black Gate of the penitenciary], Arghezi does not project his personal experiences into these poems. To have done so might have completely altered the mood of this cycle of the supposedly damned, for in his preface to the Villon translations Arghezi recalls, as we have seen, hardened murderers who nursed tiny sparrows with all the delicacy and respect of a child. But why should signs of a *descensus ad inferos* (Nekya) be found in a break with the poetic past? A break with the poetic past exists, but not in the way Balotă envisages it. Arghezi, after all, was writing these poems of *închidere, întuneric,* and *singurătate* (enclosure, darkness, and loneliness) or at least preparing them for publication, at the same time that he was embarking on a search for a supreme being, an exploration of the creative act, and a return *in illo tempore*, a re-experiencing of mythic time, the final metaphysical pattern, man's search for the Self, that emerges in *Cuvinte potrivite*. Balotă explains this apparent duality in a reference to pendular movement that derives, we believe, from a similar insight in an earlier appreciation by George Călinescu:

> Nicăieri, poate, mişcarea pendulară, oscilația tipic arghezian între extreme contrare nu e mai evidentă decât în aceste poezii, şi nu e mai apropiată de pendularea dostoievskiană între iubire şi ură, gingăşie şi brutalitate, dăruire plină de abnegație şi refuz anihilator [Nowhere, perhaps, is the pendular movement, the typically Arghezian oscillation between extreme contraries more evident than in these poems, and nowhere is it closer to the Dostoievskian swinging between love and hate,

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daintiness and brutality, a bestowing full of abnegation and annihilating rejection] (Balotă 1979: 226)[6].

Balotă insists that the experience of hell begins with reclusion, in which the essential monologue is conducted in solitude (Balotă 1979: 220). But reclusion, solitude, darkness are not limited to the experience of eternal damnation. They are also characteristic of any form of imprisonment or enclosure, whether self-imposed (the monastic calling) or dictated by outside forces. Separation from the teeming world of humanity (as we have seen in *Vraciul*) may also be a preparation for a higher level of existence or an arduous mission: witness Christ's 40 days of purification alone in the desert. And contrast this example of self-abnegation with the punishment of Francesca and Paolo in *Inferno* V, joined together eternally in their perversion and buffeted, along with a myriad of other sinners, on the winds of their passion. Balotă's comments on this nocturnal episode seem to be inspired by the decadent literature he has already rejected as a source, and in any case constitute an over-reading of Arghezi's text. The train of thoughts that takes us from this infernal atmosphere to Nakya, to the archaic night, to Dante's „l'aer Bruno", to vampirism in *Streche* constitutes a series of possible inferences that lead us further and further away from the text. Balotă cites Piranese's *Carceri* as evidence of this preoccupation with a world of damnation (Balotă 1979: 221), but there the brooding atmosphere is particularly threatening because of the relative *absence* of human beings, whether prison-slaves or their persecutors.

The pages of *Flori de mucigai*, on the other hand, swarm with human action and interaction. Separation from society (incarceration) is hardly the equivalent of exclusion from God (Hell). To cite *Streche* (Balotă 1979: 222) as an example of when vampirism comes into the open at night is surely far-fetched. *Streche* is rather a sequence of hallucinatory images of basic animal drives (ferocity, blood-letting, cannibalism – but bear in mind the Count Ugolino episode at the end of Dante's *Inferno*) brought on by forced captivity and powerfully stimulated by unfulfilled sexual desire – a recognizable psychological process. Balotă is right to insist (1979: 226) that in *Flori de mucigai* there is no beauty of suffering („frumusețe a suferinței"), no apology for crime or the sublimation of pain, as occurs in Baudelaire. Arghezi is closer to Dostoievsky's religion of human suffering. Balotă stresses the incidence of death in prison (Balotă 1979: 227), but the parodies he indicates – the Deposition of the Cross in *Dimineața*, the Last Supper in *Cina*, and the ridiculous mechanism of the *via crucis* in *Galere* (Balotă 1979: 230) – while viable are overstated. He is right, however, to note the absence of a divine presence in these and other poems. Social and moral issues abound, but the poetic voice remains ambiguous, quite prepared to condemn an unjust criminal system but reluctant to absolve those who have committed heinous crimes.

Balotă seems to suggest that the reverse of *transcendentul coboară* [the transcendent descends] would be *infernul ajunge tot mai sus* [hell reaches ever

[6] See Călinescu (1939: 21): „Al doilea aspect profund al poeziei lui Arghezi, în afara oricărei poziții noționale, este sentimentul de oscilare materială între două lumi cu densități deosebite, cerul și pământul" [The second profound aspect of Arghezi's poetry, quite apart from any notional position, is the feeling of material oscillation between two worlds of different density, heaven and earth].

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higher]. It is hard to understand what he means. There is a clear line of demarcation in *Flori de mucigai* between this world, even at its most horrific, and that otherworld, the world of angels and eternal peace. For Balotă,

> Singura întâlnire din universul imaginarului arghezian, a lui Dumnezeu cu Omul, închipuită în prezența întregului cortegiu al ierarhiei cereşti şi al ierarhiei bisericeşti este aceasta a tâlharului din *Cântec mut* [The only meeting in the Arghezian imaginary universe, of God and Man, takes place in the presence of the entire assembled ranks of the hierarchies of Heaven and Church; it is that of the outlaw from *Cântec mut*] (Balotă 1979: 242).

Balotă speaks of a break in the heavenly vault, a one-time occurrence not found even in *Cuvinte potrivite*, that allows *scala paradisi* to descend right down to earth (Balotă 1979: 243), but he lessens the impact considerably when he places the mysterious occurrence in the context of the hallucinatory vision of a man in his death throes. The context of the poem, to the contrary, makes it clear that it is not the dying man who speaks: „La patul vecinului meu/ A venit az-noapte Dumnezeu./ Cu toiag, cu îngeri şi sfinți" [Last night God came/ To my neighbor's bedside/ With crook, angels, and saints], but an anonymous speaker, who witnesses and records the event. If we choose, we might identify this speaker with Arghezi who, as poet-narrator, acts as an intermediary for the sick man, presumably incapable of speech. But it is equally possible to argue that the speaker here is another voice in the crowd, a prisoner whose bed just happened to be located alongside that of the sick man. In one sense, the final two lines of the penultimate stanza mock the volume's title: „Şi odaia cu mucegai/ A mirosit toată noaptea a Rai" [And the mouldy room / Smelled all night of Heaven]. In another sense, this poem casts an ironic light on the search of the lonely psalmist in *Cuvinte potrivite*. Whereas, in *Psalmi* 5 and 6, the poet-persona asks in vain for tangible proof of God's existence, here, in the very midst of *Flori de mucigai*, the cycle of the damned, God and all his angels descend the Ladder of Fire to bring solace to a man scorned and rejected by human society. Even if the *vision* is the result of the incoherent babbling of a sick man, feverish, hallucinating, the narrative voice still allows for the possibility of redemption. Dante shows in *Purgatorio* that it is enough for a sinner – even one unshriven, ladened with mortal sin – to die with the name of Jesus on his lips (and repentance in his heart) for his soul to be snatched from the Devil's maw.

Tudor Arghezi experienced confinement four times, five times if we include the period of so-called silence and, for a time, virtual house arrest in the fifties. In his monastery cell at Cernica, at the turn of the century, Arghezi grappled unavailingly with the problem of human imperfection, constantly seeking a system of absolute values. But the spiritual restraints of his cell are little more than a micro-image of spiritual exile (*pribegie*), the limitations of mortality first imposed upon man following his infraction of the divine word in the Garden of Eden, limitations indicated frequently in his poetry by Arghezi with phrases such as „prins pe patru laturi" [enclosed on four sides]. To this extent it is possible to agree with Alexandru George that

> Cine caută în „subiectele" lor amănunte ale biografiei spirituale a lui Arghezi îşi dă seama că măcar într-o formă primă, ele au fost scrise în chilia novicelui de la

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> Cernica [Whoever searches through the fine print of Arghezi's spiritual biography will soon recognize that in one form or another the essential details were written in the novice's cell at Cernica] (George 1970: 86).

Arghezi's other experiences of prison or confinement are of a different kind. They are not self-inflicted, but imposed from without, perhaps as a manifestation of a higher destiny. In 1938-39, for example, a serious illness confined Arghezi to bed for almost a year. His experiences in hospital (and later at home in his beloved Mărțișor) were traumatic and disturbed his interior, private world; he was forced, as when he was imprisoned some twenty years before at Văcăreşti, to look outward, and he produced a series of excellent poems. The pessimistic but on the whole selfless attitude of these poems is also reflected in a remarkable sequence of poems that treat – in the terse, unemotional manner of Ungaretti – the horrors of a war that was steadily encroaching on Romanian territory in 1943 and 1944. It may be presumed that these poems were the fruit of several months detention in a concentration camp at Târgu Jiu, in Oltenia, ironically the ancestral homeland of the Arghezi/ Theodorescu family. There are indeed times when the writer is forced by the sheer enormity of historical events to pause in his introspective deliberations – or, as we would put it here, "suspend his ego" – and face the horror and degradation around him. By a strange paradox, *actual* confinement – as a monk at Cernica, prisoner at Văcăreşti, hospital patient in Bucharest, and political detainee at Târgu Jiu – reduces Arghezi's metaphysical suffering and increases his awareness of the plight of others. Seen in this light, the prison (or monastic) cell is no longer an escape or separation from life, but a vantage-point, a window onto the world at large.

The other side of the coin to this moment of compassion (and release from suffering) is the attribution of evil in *Morții*, the poem that brings the first part of the cycle to a close. Chained or not, dead or alive, the prisoners are victims of society, whose „Răni vinete, semne infame,/ Vor fi vindecate la cer" [Purple wounds, infamous marks/ Will be healed in heaven] and for whom the bare earth will be better „Ca domnii ce v-au osândit,/ ca preoții ce nu v-au citit" [Than the lords who condemned you/ And the priests who neglected the rites]. The presentation is neutral; dispassionately, the poetic voice merely records the dehumanized treatment of those destined to die „Fără mumă, fără popă, fără cruce" [Without mother, priest or cross]. Then a change occurs, and through the voice of the gatekeeper – but not in the authoritative voice of the poet – the dead prisoners, whose bodies still lie heaped on the cart, are warned to look to their own consciences and not rely on the misery and injustice they have endured on earth to assure themselves a place in Paradise:

> Și băgați/ De seamă, să nu vă-ncurcați./ Căci mâine seară, poate chiar diseară,/ Pe la aprinsul stelelor de ceară,/ Mai treceți o dată/ La judecată [Take care/ To keep your mind free and not get caught up./ For tomorrow evening, perhaps even tonight/ At the rise of waxen stars/ You'll pass once more/ To judgment].

With these trenchant comments, Arghezi provides – albeit indirectly – a final answer to those who would link this cycle of poems to deterministic principles or to the poet's anarchistic and socialist leanings before the First World War.

At this point, the locus appears to shift to a gypsy camp (*şatră*) and to the story of not just one tribe but many. The change of pace, however, is illusory. We

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soon learn that the six poems that follow merely comprise one cycle within the whole, one segment of a greater story. As Arghezi's particular prism reveals, the gypsies are no different from other men and women. Since Arghezi's poetry has often been compared to that of Lorca, a cursory glance at *Canto jondo* and *Romancero gitano* establishes that the gypsy is the archetypal inhabitant of Lorca's poetical land[7]. It might be difficult to argue that the same is true of Arghezi. And yet, here too, gypsies do represent archetypal figures of human freedom, living beyond the constraints of geographical, socio-political, and historical boundaries, as well as beyond those moral and ethical imperatives that have come to be accepted as the dominant patterns of Western civilization. All the more poignant, therefore, are the spatial limitations that incarceration places upon their nomadic and free-wheeling existence.

Balotă notes that Arghezi is not immune to

> tipica şi străvechea simpatie pentru femeile „pierdute", pentru păcătoasa care „mult a iubit", aureolată de o lumină piezişă, a iubirii brutale şi a morţii [that typical, age-old sympathy for *fallen* women, for the sinner who *loved passionately*, her halo at a slant, for brutal love and death] (Balotă 1979: 240).

In the *Walpurgisnacht* that Balotă envisages for *Flori de mucigai*, Tinca and Rada are „femei-flori ce răspândesc în jurul lor concupiscenţa erotică, beţia pătimaşă" [flower-women who spread in their path an erotic concupiscence, an ardent drunkenness]. They are „Fiinţe telurice, aceste hetaire inocente de mahala balcanică..." [Telluric beings, these innocent hetaerae of Balkanic slums]; they offer – „în universul imaginarului arghezian – momentele... lascivităţii erotice triumfătoare" [in Arghezi's imaginary universe – moments... of a triumphant erotic lasciviousness] (Balotă 1979: 240). Balotă has perhaps allowed himself to be carried away – like the prisoners in whose name Arghezi speaks – by the recounting of an event that took place outside the prison walls, an event that with re-telling has taken on mythic proportions. Tinca is only alive in the imagination of these prisoners. They address, admonish her, as though she were standing right in front of them, in all the glory of her ebony flesh. Yet it is the collective verdict of the prisoners – a particularly telling volte-face – that finally informs us that the image of beauty summoned up by the incantatory power of poetry is little more than a mirage, a hypothesis, an embodiment of wishful dreams, since Năstase, her lover (now one of the inmates) had long ago cut short her natural life:

> Vezi, Năstase, osânditul/ Nu te-a pătruns decât o dată,/ Şi atuncea toată,/ Cu tot cuţitul [See, Năstase the lifer/ Only penetrated you once,/ But he went right through/ With the length of his knife].

In this tale within a story framework, Arghezi the poet-interpreter transmits almost intact, perhaps only slightly embroidered – such is the particular convention – the creation of collective fantasy, a story told and re-told a thousand times, and now told once more for a wider audience, the readers of *Flori de mucigai*. Truly, „stihuri fără an... stihuri de acum" [verses for all seasons… verses of today]. But the

[7] We owe many of these insights concerning Lorca's poetry to a friend and colleague at the University of Kentucky, Edward Stanton.

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point that Balotă forgets is that, in this merciless rejoinder, Tinca is implicitly blamed for her own misfortune:

> Tu n-ai voit să spui/ Nimănui/ Unde înnoptai,/ Curvă dulce, cu mărgăritărele de mai! [You refused to tell anyone/ Where you spent the night,/ Sweet trollop/ With pearls of May!].

While technically *Tinca* is not part of the gypsy intra-cycle, this poem, along with *Rada*, demonstrates a process whereby a vulgar amorous conquest, a cynical act of betrayal, or a dance of wanton abandonment that aspires to the heavenly heights

> Zvârle piciorul/ Spre pâlcul, în cer, unde Săgetătorul/ Aține noaptea drumul vulturilor de-argint [Whirls a leg/ Towards the flock, there in the sky/ Where Sagittarius/ Stalks at night the path of white eagles].

may be transformed into an event of mythic proportions. Metamorphosis takes place, and the result is spell-binding. As Balotă claims, there is little evidence of heroism, of higher virtues, in Arghezi's protagonists, merely instinctive responses: self-defense, envy, jealousy, sexual desire. Since we have placed *Flori de mucigai* in the context of Lorca's gypsy ballads, this is perhaps the basic contrast between Spanish and Romanian world views. On the one hand, individualism, death wish, defiance of any authority (divine or temporal); on the other, the same individualism and defiance of authority, but also suppressed yearning, resignation and fatalism. But even if Arghezi's gypsy re-creations do not aspire to the quasi-supernatural powers of Lorca's protagonists, the voice in these poems – like the voice in Lorca's ballads – does not belong to the poet, but to an imaginary gypsy speaker, whose mentality, however momentarily, is reflected in the flamboyant style of his or her race. Where else in Romanian poetry, where else indeed in European literature, is there a poem that emulates the fluid movements of Rada's dance? No death wish here, no submission to destiny, no Sabbat with all its perverse ritual, but ardency, joy of living, and triumphant individualism. In this brief cycle the gypsy protagonists are represented as thieves and quacks, cripples and lewd dancers, the jetsam and flotsam of human society; yet they too have loyalties, they too have wives and children waiting outside the prison walls, caring for their needs and anxiously awaiting their return. Here too the technique of the volte-face prevails: the last image of *Nostalgii* is that of the remnants of the tribe led by a „băitană/ Bălană", a flaxen-haired girl, clearly an example of child-theft that disproves the rule.

In an impressive conclusion, Balotă notes that the slave, the sinner, in Arghezi's imaginary universe, is a man of frustrated desires, thirsty and starving: „Poetul îi acordă acestui lipsit, demnitatea reprezentării în esență a condiției umane" [The poet accords this needy no-good the dignity that comes with a representation of the human condition in its very essence]. In this pestilential world of the poor, the sick, the weak, the incarcerated, of anyone to whom the world is like a prison, „Nu se petrece o transfigurare estetică" [no aesthetic transfiguration takes place] and „Ieşirea din această casă a morților în viață este un miracol mereu amânat" [Emergence from this house of the dead into the world of the living is a miracle constantly postponed] (Balotă 1979: 246). But we would prefer to believe that an aesthetic transfiguration does in fact take place. How otherwise would it be possible

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for poems of such startling immediacy to emerge? There is such an intimate participation in these mysteries of life and death, suffering and final release. The voice ultimately – an imperative of this particular fictionalized recreation – is Arghezi's, but the voice of Arghezi the prisoner, interpreting the experience of suffering for his illiterate companions. There is no other way; each man's suffering is both personal and universal. Christ's anguish is the archetypal structure in Western literature. As Simone Weil puts it in her essay on *Human Personality*:

> Every time that there arises from the depths of a human heart the childish cry which Christ himself could not restrain, Why am I being hurt? then there is certainly injustice (Weil 1962: 10–11).

Arghezi, with his inimitable Balkanic color and verve, brings his own *House of the Dead* to our attention, he makes us believe in it, share in its experiences while recognizing our own limitations, and perhaps our own prejudices. His achievement is that he extends the horizons of Romanian poetry far beyond anything previously envisaged. Poetry is not a watertight tradition; it is always in the making, and, sometimes, elegant silks must be steeped in murky waters.

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Abstract

According to Eugéne Ionesco and Mircea Eliade, Tudor Arghezi is the greatest Romanian poet of the 20th century. In this study I am in disagreement with critics such as Ovidiu Crohmălniceanu who recognize in *Flori de mucigai* (1931) the aesthetics of ugliness proclaimed by Arghezi in *Testament* the preface-poem to his first book, *Cuvinte potrivite* (1927), and I take issue with Nicolae Balotă when he speaks of a demoniacal, anti-art, presence in these poems written in the years that followed the poet's detention at Văcăreşti (1918-20). For Balotă the voice of the poet-narrator in *Flori de mucigai* is that of a *raisonneur*, but with the exception of the frame-poem Arghezi does not speak directly in his own voice, instead, by "suspending his ego", he adopts a multiplicity (or chorality, in the style of Verga) of voices, so as to give expression to the stories and fantasies of the prisoners. And the technique of the *volte-face* (almost never the *poantă* or quibble indicated by Balotă) allows him to correct deceitfulness or so-called truths.

Balotă speaks of a *descensus ad infernos*, solitude and darkness, however, are not limited to eternal damnation, they are present in any form of confinement, and these prison-poems swarm with human activity. For Arghezi reclusion or spatial restriction (as novice at the Cernica monastery, hospital patient, detainee at Văcăreşti and later at Târgu Jiu) offered the opportunity to view the world outside. Therefore, no *Walpurgisnacht* in *Flori de mucigai*, but ardency, *joie-de-vivre* and triumphant individualism. No aesthetic transfiguration, as Balotă insists? To the contrary! Arghezi in this cycle of poems transforms The House of the Dead into the world of the living–evil or good, it matters little. His achievement in *Flori de mucigai* is that he extends the horizons of Romanian poetry far beyond anything previously envisaged. Poetry is not a watertight tradition, sometimes elegant silks must be steeped in murky water, and the cry of pain that comes forth is not only personal, but also universal.

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