Going so Far in Faith: Tudor Arghezi’s Psalms and their Place in Romanian

Religious Poetry

1. From Christian Traditions to Religious Poetry

Romanians were Christianized even before the faith was made official during the reign of Emperor Constantine, as missionaries had brought the spirit of Christian faith to Tomis, the capital of Scythia Minor, in Dobrudja. In the 1st c. of our era, St. Apostle Andrew arrived in Dobrudja, a fact which is acknowledged by geographic place names across the area.

Here, father Dionysus the Exiguus of Scythia Minor, who suggested the counting of Christian years starting from Christ’s birth, lived and worked, and it is due to him that this counting came to be called the “Dionysian era”. St. Sava sang psalms in church and the Christians, who lived along with the pagans of the Daco-Roman population, were following “the Orthodox rules and the decisions of the 1st Ecumenical Synod of Niceea”. A series of bishops active in Tomis acknowledged the existence of an early institutional church life. Since the publication of Liturghierul slavon (The Slavonic Missal) in 1508, our first text printed by Macarie in Slavonic, 500 years have passed; it demonstrates the glamorous age of the written letter, a symbol of the civilization north of the Danube. In the 17th c., Dosoftei gave the first translation of the psalms in Romanian, Psaltirea pre versuri tocmită (The Psalter of Written Verse), in 1673.
Readers of the world’s literature are more familiar with the *homines religiosi* and the western mystic poets, such as Angelus Silesius, Teresa de Avila, and particularly Dante Alighieri and Juan de la Cruz, or those of eastern culture, Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagitus or Maxim the Confessor, of whom much has been written. Romanian poetry of religious inspiration is not very well-known worldwide, having missed the chance of being translated into international languages.

Despite this, with a rich spiritual tradition, Romanians created genuine poetry of religious inspiration in all epochs. During the modern era, religious verse was written by H. Rădulescu⁴ and Gr. Alexandrescu⁵, whose poem entitled *Rugăciune (Prayer)* contains reverberations of Lamartine and Young⁶. This fact establishes the circulation of religious motifs in the Romantic period in Europe. During the time of the great classics, Mihai Eminescu also wrote a touching poem entitled *Rugăciune* and George Coșbuc⁷ reflected in his poetry the Christian beliefs of the peasants of Transylvania. Octavian Goga⁸, son of a priest, similarly used church vocabulary in his poems, to express social ideas, as for example, in *Oltul (The Olt)*, a masterpiece which gives a personal note to his poetry in the Messianic key. The period between the two World Wars consolidated this Orthodox tendency towards Traditionalism, in opposition to Modernism, a consolidation led by the Christian belief revealed in poetry, as illustrated by Ion Pillat, V. Voiculescu, A. Maniu, Radu Gyr, Nechifor Crainic, all from the *Gândirea⁹* review.

After the coming of communism to Romania, a negative response towards such theological personalities was made apparent, as the experience of journalist and poet Alexandru Teodosescu (also known as Father Daniel Tudor the Saint) who had organized the movement of “man’s
deification through permanent prayer” at the Antim Monastery in Bucharest indicates. A Biblical syntagm suggested the name of Burning Bush\textsuperscript{10} for this spiritual movement, which between the years 1946-1950 got the attention of important personalities, such as Prof. Tudor Vianu, Constantin Joja, architect, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, novelist, Mircea Vulcănescu, philosopher and distinguished poets like Ion Barbu and Vasile Voiculescu. During the communist reign, their mystic manifestations were prosecuted, and their religious faith brought down upon them severe sanctions, resulting in years of imprisonment. Nonetheless, the spirit of Orthodox faith prevailed, and a remarkable Hebrew scholar (the poet Ion Alexandru) delivered public speeches on Biblical topics at the University of Bucharest, wrote religious poetry, and made a new translation of the Biblical Canticles.

While in the 1970s a few poets (such as Daniel Turcea) had asserted themselves, after the anticommunist revolt of December 1989, a new generation of religious poets appeared, represented by writers like Adrian Popescu or theologians like Traian Dorz, whose verse on religious topics were recently anthologized under the title \textit{Din pragul veșniciei (On Permanence Threshold)}\textsuperscript{11}. Dorz went so far as to interpret \textit{Comoara Psalmilor (Psalms Treasure)}\textsuperscript{12}, and created volumes consecrated to daily meditations and prayers. In sum, after a long official hiatus, theological research on all levels was restored and publicly accepted.

2. The Case of the Iconoclastic Poet Tudor Arghezi

2.1. Biographical and Intellectual Outline
Among the writers of Romanian religious poetry, if a Vasile Voiculescu or a Nichifor Crainic who asserted the Orthodox faith were placed at one end, one could place Tudor Arghezi at the other, opposite end. His poetry bore the strong imprint of nihilism, gliding from faith to apostasy and back, in a communication with Biblical references from which neither the individual, nor the poet, had parted. His works oscillate between atheism and Biblical references. In his touching anxiety, externalized through a narcissistic confession, Arghezi gets involved in a trans-individualistic experience, a “tragic game”.

However, it must be noted that this experience is rather more dramatic than tragic. In addition, the themes of Arghezi’s meditations on existential motifs are not confined to his monologue with God in a cycle of 17 psalms (where faith alternates with denial) but also contain reflections on existential subjects like death, from Duhovnicească (Spiritual) to De-a v-aţi ascuns (Hide-and-Seek) and De ce-aş fi trist? (Why Should I Mourn?). The best authorized witness to his evolution is Valeriu Bartolomeu Anania, Arghezi’s apprentice who succeeded more than his master, in both literature and liturgical-theological activity.

Anania’s confession is thereby a great chance to see through Arghezi’s inner spiritual struggle, his creative process from its start, for he was the only one able to draw our present critical attention, and the only one to show us the truth of Arghezi’s quest for a personal mystical experience, a spiritual inquiry, gained by a bold, personal engagement with the Transcendent. Anania met Arghezi late in life and they enjoyed a very special relationship. For example,
Anania claims that Arghezi took the habit at the Cernica Monastery not out of “vocation”, but out of the pressure of poverty. Given the monastic name of Joseph, Arghezi settled in a small room on the first floor of the “old abbey”, eventually becoming a hierodeacon, the first step in the Church’s hierarchy.

During his novitiate at Cernica, Arghezi wrote poems he would later publish under the title *Cuvinte potrivite* (*Adjusted Words*). He won the patronage of Iosif Gherghian, the Bishop of Ungrowallachia, a scholar of vast erudition and a “scholar hierarch with a very innocent life, of whom Arghezi kept a most gentle, unencumbered recall.” Taking up the bishop’s name, Arghezi’s wife would endearingly call him *Father Joseph* on the phone. According to Anania, “in his naiveté, the poet was convinced he had chosen a sort of code name!”¹⁵, understood only by close friends. Anania also makes the remark: “In its classical definition, monasticism is a strictly personal decision, and abandoning it is equally personal. There is no appointment in monasticism, nor is there any dismissal (except for a serious infringement of discipline). It can only be assumed by the individual and can be abandoned only by him.”¹⁶

While not forming a damnable offence of his vows, Arghezi’s writings took up the hours of the night and intrigued the other monks who were irritated by the bishop’s protection of him. During this time, Arghezi crafted a manuscript of fiction, *Icoane de lemn* (*Wooden Icons*), inspired by the monastic life, seen in its passive, if negative tones. Quite unexpectedly, “the editor kept only the scandalous material, which would sell plentifully”¹⁷. The idea was accepted due to its
author’s urgent need to get money. Because of the ensuing scandal, the Holy Synod forbade the faithful to read the originally published book. (Upon its re-publication in 1966, Tudor Arghezi blamed the original editors for focusing solely on the negative scenarios in his manuscript.) The author intended to re-unite the text in its entirety, a desire never to be fulfilled.

The troubles he endured with the original publication led, in 1905, to hierodeacon Joseph’s having his hair cut, and to letting the Metropolitan Bishop know that he was giving up monasticism, leaving for Switzerland. His decision was irreversible and accepted as such by the Church, though Arghezi always carried the nostalgia of monasticism in his heart. That is why he considered his residence Șerbănești, a monastic domain, a settlement, confessing his intention to wear a rough woolen cloth mantle in his own printing shop, created in his backyard, so as to make it easier to have his original and subsequent writings properly published. As a general strategy, Arghezi believed in the need to insist on the manuscript form, rewritten until complete. “Literature requires an intimate expectancy period, for months, sometimes years. The drawer is a kind of purgatory, from which the page leaves for eternity or for nothingness.”

Admired by Anania for his expressiveness, Arghezi is said to have retorted to him: “Poetry is complete at the same time with the poet, the language grows with the people.” Anania was the friend who had been visiting him for a quarter of century, listening to him reveal his worries, joys and despairs. Anania confessed:
…at times, I did stir his wounds, challenged him to unrelenting explanations, judged him harshly. But he always answered me with some kind of gentleness that would leave me helpless, giving me back to the state of inner humbleness, as it suits an apprentice and as he displayed it…\textsuperscript{21}

The spiritual duality created by his dual concerns (of literary creation and theology), left its mark, revealed in the dedications written by Arghezi on his newly published books: “To our brother in Christ and Homer, Valeriu Anania, with old love and new kiss, on Annunciation. Tudor Arghezi.”\textsuperscript{22}

The question is: Did Arghezi take the monastic habit because he might have been convinced of his religious vocation? The monastery was the most suitable site for the creation of the Psalms, which do not acknowledge their author as a \textit{homo religiosus}, but as a fighter lacking any respect towards celestial taboos, ready to adopt a pugnacious attitude in facing the Divinity, being constantly opaque to God’s demands. “Alone now in your story – great and rare – /I stay to measure swords with you, - just vying,/Not keen on coming off with colours flying:/I want to touch you and to cry:’ He’s there!’”\textsuperscript{23}

Arghezi’s renunciation of the monastic life in 1905 could arguably be explained by the fact that his vocation wasn’t strong enough, but the evidence is incomplete. Nicolae Balotă gives his
explicit opinion: “We don’t have enough elements to decide on the ‘faith’ or ‘lack of faith’ of Tudor Arghezi, the man.” His inmost conviction, as a principle, is that a writer’s life and character need to be put aside, the interest should be focused on his work. Considering the two paradigms – the human and the divine - Balotă nuances his interpretation: the relationship of the Psalmist with God is fundamentally ontic and subsidiarily gnoseologic – a relationship identified with that between the man and the sign. The drama of the Psalmist consists in the extent to which the sign can be known.

Set on a dramatic attempt to find the equivalent of the Divine Being in a concrete plane, Arghezi the poet lives a most touching spiritual experience, therefore in the Psalm published in the literary weekly Luceafărul in 1959, he turns radical again, denying God’s existence. (That does not mean that in Arghezi’s creation there are no poems on Eucharistic motifs, such as Cântec de boală (Suffering Song), Har (Grace), Urare (Wish), since in the “poem of the little and the tiny” he would look for God in the petty world down on the ground, and in his Psalms he asserts his ability of seeing God, or reveals his own vanity, he, the one supposed to worship the Lord nailed on the cross.) Indeed, Balotă discovers the sign of victory right where Arghezi seems to feel defeated in his wish to have the revelation of the Divine: the happy-making union can never be complete, but the psalmist owns the word which he opposes to the divine silence.

Not even the semiotician Emilia Parpala is able to clarify this problem approached by most of the writer’s critics, but suggests new ways of understanding Arghezi’s creation of religious
inspiration. Starting from the premises that “The Soul is composed of a multitude of overlapping images”, in *Modelul semiotic al actanţei Psalmilor (The Semiotic Model of the Psalms Actants)* she exemplifies “the oxymoronic soul”, “the hesitating self”, “the suffering soul”, “the dissipated self” and “the archaeological soul” as hypostases of the poet’s vision and hence the reader’s natural gliding towards the explanation of the phenomenology of hesitation, specific to his outlook on God’s existence.

### 2.2. The Fate-ful Balance of Doubt and Belief Revealed within Arghezi’s Writings

Though Arghezi wrote most of his *Psalms* during his monastic years, their number increased after he left Cernica. His religious poetry was not confined to the cycle of the *Psalms*, contained in his volume *Cuvinte potrivite*; these psalms are present in many of his later poetic cycles.

Arghezi’s work contains psalms in prose too. He left a most surprising interpretation of David’s psalms, creating a typology of the genre, from the Promethean, grandiose psalms, to those reflecting helplessness in solitude – as one option among many in the quest of the absolute truth. Emilia Parpala discovers a kind of “mask play” in an adventure which we consider to be that of the human condition’s identification. In summation, in Arghezi the psalmist there is a paradigmatic presence of the restless contemporary spirit, not a *homo religiosus* of medieval source.

Giving up the monastic life did not mean for Arghezi giving up the meditation on Biblical themes, which continued to add to the level of paradoxical profoundness in his subsequent
literary creations. For example, while he was obsessed with Saul’s conversion on the way to Damascus, with Apostle Paul’s life, he never agreed to comment on them. Furthermore, while his poetry of religious inspiration could give some answers regarding the author’s outlook on life, the most accurate mirror of his dual, restless identity, characterized by a permanent quest, Arghezi nonetheless believed in the inner law of doubt: “Doubts are not likely to abandon you, even at the age of eighty. It is the best thing that can happen to a writer.”

Arghezi’s continuous belief in God in the face of such doubt caused controversy among the literary critics, having as an effect an impoverishment of their commentary, considering that up to the present time the artistic technique of intensification of the aesthetic value through religious value has not been studied. Not all versification employing a Biblical theme becomes religious poetry per se. These two levels of approach have their specific dynamics and the rightful balancing of each alone can lead to a genuine revelation of the method’s true literary or theological value.

3. Conclusions

Romanian literature has encompassed religious poetry across all eras, sometimes discreetly, sometimes boldly, depending upon the epistemes of the age at hand. Yet, even in aggressively secular times, nothing could annihilate it completely, even during the time of harsh communist oppression, when it had to find underground methods of sustenance and propagation. This was due to the fact that it was felt by the profoundly religious Romanian people as a permanently
indispensable moral and spiritual support in their lives. It is the claim of this study that the paradoxically doubting and yet believing poetry of Tudor Arghezi’s represents a central part of the lived faith of Romanians themselves, by providing us a perennial spiritual mirror against which the lesser ephemeral world is measured.

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1 Mircea Păcuraru, Istoria bisericii ortodoxe române [History of the Romanian Orthodox Church], (București: Editura Institutului Biblia și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1991), 151-155.

2 Păcurariu, 113.
Dimitrie Barilă, (known by his monastic name, Dosoftei) – 1624-1693, scholar, bishop of Moldavia, poet and translator.

Ion Heliade Rădulescu (1802-1872), writer, philosopher and politician, founding member of the Romanian Academy and its first president.

Grigore Alexandrescu (1810-1885), poet and fable writer.


George Coșbuc (1866-1918), Transylvanian poet, son of a Greek-Catholic priest.

Octavian Goga (1881-1938), Transylvanian poet, academician and politician, ex-prime-minister of Romania, between 1937-1938.

Gândirea, important literary magazine of traditional orientation between the wars, which generated an aesthetic and literary movement.


Literary pseudonym of Ion Theodorescu (1880-1967), prominent Romanian poet, prose writer and pamphletist.

Valeriu [Bartolomeu] Anania, b. 1921, Romanian writer, poet and playwright.


Anania, 51.

Anania, 48.

The official expulsion of Iosif Theodorescu from the monastic order was completed 7 years later. See Valeriu Anania, 51.

Anania, 78.
20 Anania, 65.

21 Anania, 9.

22 Anania, 8.

23 Tudor Arghezi, Psalm (To size you up for long has been my task), (in Poezii/Poems), 79.

24 Nicolae Balotă, “Scholii la Psalmi “[“Explanations of the Psalms”], in: Opera lui Tudor Arghezi [Tudor Arghezi’s Work], (Editura Eminescu, 1997), 151