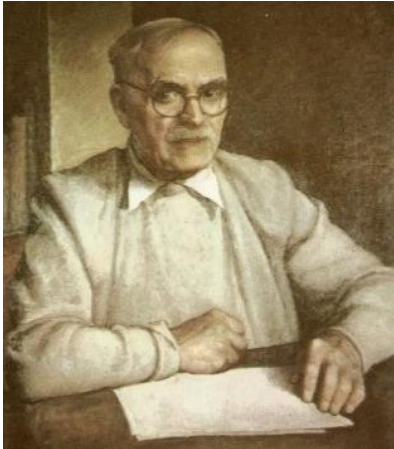




Tudor Arghezi

Writer (1880-1967)



By his real name Ion N. Theodorescu, Tudor Arghezi was born in Bucharest in 1880. His Oltenian roots lay, as he liked to confess, in Cărbunești, Gorj County. His childhood was not exactly happy. He was forced to work as a custodian and a shopman. From the age of 19 until 1904, he went to Cernica Monastery; this period proved later to have left a deep imprint on his writing. He travelled to Switzerland, France and Italy. However, in 1910 his roving experience came to an abrupt end. In 1948, he withdrew from public life to Mărțișor, his books being banned by the communist regime. His rehabilitation was slow, but not without his being forced to make certain compromises with the regime. Various testimonies point out that

he constantly maintained a fresh spirit, often evincing an electrifying and humorous personality. (See Lucia Ivănescu, *I Knew Tudor Arghezi*. Bucharest: Eminescu Publishing House, 1981).

He is known primarily as a poet, but he was also one of the greatest pamphleteers and he published works in prose. He made his debut in poetry in 1896, under the penname Ion Theo, in the *Orthodox League* edited by Al. Macedonski, who immediately realised his great talent. He published his first volume of poems rather late, at the age of 47, under a *recherché* title: *The Right Words*. In 1955, he was elected as a member of the Romanian Academy and, as a full crowning of his activity, in 1965 he was awarded the Herder Prize, also known as the Nobel Prize of the East, other Romanian writers who received this prize including: Nichita Stănescu, Adrian Marino, Ana Blandiana or Marin Sorescu.

Initially his poetry was misunderstood because it exceeded by far the readers' horizon of expectations. Șerban Cioculescu was one of his first champions. He appeared to understand Arghezi's poetic approach, discovering that there was a disparity between the "synthesis proposed by the poet and the reader's faculty of lyrical perception." (See Șerban Cioculescu, *Introduction to the Poetry of T. Arghezi*, second edition. Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1971). Other critics who expressed their opinion on Arghezi's work include George Călinescu, Nicolae Balotă, Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, Nicolae Manolescu, Ion Negoitescu, Dumitru Micu, Ion Pop and so on. It should be emphasised that these critics have unanimously confirmed Arghezi's position in the upper echelons of Romanian poetry, very close to Mihai Eminescu.

Arghezi's poetry lends itself very well to the negative categories theorised by the German Hugo Friedrich in *The Structure of Modern Poetry*. Arghezi defies the



common place universe and cultivates, in Friedrich's terms, bizarre beauty, the misshapen, the ugly, the grotesque, and the absurd, in other words, the abnormal, which become the basic principles of his poetry. Embracing the aesthetic of ugliness, he rallies himself to the Symbolist Movement. (See the analogy between Arghezi's *Flowers of Mildew* and Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*). Poetry is relegated to the periphery, to the world of slums, thieves, jailhouses: "Through cold and mud, in a queue/ The thieves trudge along, two by two,/ Crawling with their feet in shackles,/ Toiling in sweat-drenched morasses" (the poem "Dinner"), dead-infested cellars: "Handsome Ion, in the cellar of the dead,/ With a tender smile, lying naked on the slab,/ For three nights the rats have chewed him,/ From his slobbery mouth there drips some rosin" (the poem "Ion Ion"). Poetry is subjected to an alchemical process of distillation: "From sores and mildew and quagmire/ I've spurt forth new beauty and allure" (the poem "Testament").

His religious poetry of self-definition from *Psalms* maintains the archetypal image of the deity, the poet becoming a creator in a deeply spiritual sense. He is concerned with words, striving to give them new meanings. Nicolae Balotă calls him a "craftsman." Children's poetry, the poetry of the grain and crumb, pictured as a minute universe, might best explain the functioning mechanisms of a poem in which playfulness and, sometimes, banter prevail:

"God may be however great
But hasn't even the third grade.
His reading skills are not terrific,
And he fares badly in arithmetic. ...
This he knows: only to make,
Put together flake by flake.
Fashioning humans and light
With a little spit and grime,
From a slightly longer dough swathe
Carves the moon out with a lathe" (the poem "ABC").

This is also why his poetry, attached, as a formula, to a generally closed-in modernism, in accordance with the "art for art's sake" slogan, finds multiple breaches through which it can "breathe" easily.

It is, by now, a well-acknowledged fact that, as Mircea Cărtărescu contends in *Romanian Post-Modernism*, Arghezi's poetry builds on the "residual background of a more ancient poetry," perhaps the same that postmodern poetry might also be built on. Cărtărescu claims that Tudor Arghezi was an atypical modernist, who could be considered the "precursor" of the postmodern poets. He was, indeed, the poet who profoundly changed the paradigm of Romanian poetry, forcefully breaking the spell of sober romanticism and reshaping the existing poetic universe, in accordance with his own laws. Although influenced by several literary trends, his formula remains one of the most original in Romanian literature.

S.G.