

TUDOR ARGHEZI
TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL IMPEY
AND BRIAN SWANN

Selected Poems of Tudor Arghezi



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MICHAEL IMPEY *and* BRIAN SWANN

The Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation

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Translators' Introduction

JOSEPH BRODSKY, in a *New York Review of Books* essay, remarked that Mandelstam was "a formal poet in the highest sense of the word," and that a translator should begin his work with a search for at least "a metrical equivalent to the original form." The present translators have not attempted to apply this method to the work of Tudor Arghezi. Arghezi is not a formal poet in the same way as Mandelstam, who succeeded in exploiting and working the various architectonic possibilities of poetry. Arghezi's formality is the formality of the *sound*—the heavily accented rhymes, internal rhymes, assonances. Therefore we have not tried to bring over meter and form, or even to create "a metrical equivalent"; we have tried to find an equivalent, however inadequate, to the sound. And perhaps the question of metrical form is at bottom a question of music. As Brodsky complained in his review-essay: "The problem lies in the absence of sound," in the Mandelstam translations. Throughout, we have done our best to be guided by one of Arghezi's supreme aims: to work with and not against the grain of the medium.

In this book, we have also attempted to learn from Arghezi the translator, and avoid *traducere* (the "literal," "correct" approach), and to aim at *îlmăcire* (an attempt, in the poet's own words, "to enter into the spirit of the original"). Arghezi regarded the translations of his work done into Italian by Quasimodo as unsuccessful because the Nobel Prize-winning poet failed to respect "the secret part." If the present translators have failed, it is not for want of trying to plumb that "secret which cannot be divulged," even though the secret is "contained in the spirit of the language in which it was written."

How is it that Arghezi has been translated into so many languages but not English? One reason may be that at times he seems rather remote in our language. With a number of exceptions (particularly the poems in *Flowers of Mildew*), his poems are not easy to *hear* in English: the situations seem not specific, not accessible to the image. He is too close for us not to feel a little polemical about his symbolist poetics, and not far enough away for us to grant him poetic autonomy. The prevalent mood of contemporary American poetry, in its late surrealist phase, makes it hard for us to assimilate Arghezi into our idiom. Then there is simply the impossibility of translating poetry anyway—but perhaps one should not worry *too* much about not bringing over the exact feel and nature of a foreign poet. An anecdote recounted by George Seferis is *à propos* here. He was up late one night translating Yeats, till, exhausted and discouraged at a particularly knotty part, he went to bed. He dreamed, and in the dream he was told not to worry because he couldn't find the Greek to express the exact shades of the English. If he could, it would no longer be Greek but English.

Finally, so far as the selection of poems from the *corpus* is concerned, we have selected those we think will best stand the test of time. Excluded are the anecdotal (at least from the *Fitting Words* series), the lightweight, and the opposite, poems of religious import which rely heavily on an arcane involuted approach and seem somewhat portentous. We have included only a few poems from Arghezi's latest work, since his last two cycles of major dimensions, 1907—*Landscapes* and *Hymn to Man*, are unitary compositions, and it is difficult to detach individual poems from their context.

The Romanian originals of the poems we have translated were published in *Scieri*, I-IV (Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1962-63). We have, however, respected the more traditional order of the poems, and have included them in the cycles in which they first appeared.

Acknowledgments

WE WISH to thank the poet's heirs, Mitzura Arghezi and Baruşu Arghezi, and The Romanian Writers Union in Bucharest for permission to translate the poems in this selection and to include *en face* the Romanian originals of the same poems.

We owe a special thanks to Mitzura Arghezi, who showed us great courtesy in answering our many questions and was unstinting in her efforts to locate out-of-print editions.

The illustrations by Ligia Macovei have been taken from *Tudor Arghezi: Poezii* (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1970) and are reproduced here by permission of the artist and the Editor of Editura Minerva.

Some poems in this book have appeared in the following journals: *The American Poetry Review*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Chelsea*, *Contemporary Literature in Translation*, *Granite*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Nation*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Texas Quarterly*, and *Translation*. "Gadfly," "Tinca," "John John," and "Annunciation" appeared in *Antaeus*.

Preface

THE ONLY Romanian writers known today in the United States are those who settled permanently in the West. Even these writers are acclaimed for their contributions to French literature or for their activities in other domains, and scant attention is paid to their Romanian work. Only recently, for instance, have Western critics acknowledged the importance of Tristan Tzara's Romanian verse in his evolution as a Dadaist and surrealist poet. Similarly, much of the criticism devoted to Eugène Ionesco's theater utterly disregards the first draft of *The Bald Soprano*, which we now know was written in Romania in the thirties. A fellow expatriate, Mircea Eliade, is renowned as a historian of religions, but his Romanian novels and short stories are usually ignored, even though they contain the seeds from which his mature achievements sprang. If it is difficult to persuade an English-speaking audience that the Romanian writings of cultural giants such as these are of any significance, it is surely well-nigh impossible to present a poet whose career followed a reverse course. Can a poet who turned a deaf ear to contemporary European trends and sought to integrate the experience of symbolism with a vibrant folk heritage retain our interest today? Must we always judge others in terms of our own accomplishments? And if indeed we must, how do we avoid falling into the trap of cultural imperialism?

Tudor Arghezi has long been established as the leading Romanian poet of this century. He is also much appreciated in Europe and Latin America; his poetry has been translated into more than fifteen languages, including versions by Neruda, Rafael Alberti, and Quasimodo. Many of those who belittled his poetry in Romania before the Second World War

now accept his greatness, but almost of one accord they point to Arghezi the man and exclaim: "Ah, but that's different!" What sort of man, then, was this iconoclast who became the poet laureate of socialist Romania? One thing is certain: his life spanned the whole evolution of modern poetry, from 1880, the year of his birth in Bucharest, to 1967. He earned the reputation (not always deservedly) of a difficult, withdrawn, enigmatic man; an opportunist in politics, grasping and punctilious in financial matters. The only Romanian writer until very recently to earn a living solely by what he published, Arghezi took immense pains to shield his private life from prying eyes, insisting again and again that a writer should be judged by his works and not by moral scruples or public posturing. What little is known of his early life only serves to underline this enigmatic quality. We know, for example, that following a bitter quarrel with his father he ran away from home at the age of eleven and thereafter saw to his own schooling. A lifelong friend, Gala Galaction, has attested to the warmth and sincerity of his personality at this time. When questioned about his family relations, Arghezi himself usually declined comment.

He was a man of endless surprises. Quite suddenly, in 1899, as though to satisfy some mystical urge, he broke with Alexandru Macedonski's cénacle of symbolists and became a monk. He continued to write, even as a novice, and contributed a number of mawkish, overblown poems to the little-known review *Linia dreaptă* and published an *ars poetica* ("Vers și poezie") that anticipated by some twenty years the Abbé Bremond's theories on pure poetry. Alarmed by his late-night reading of subversive literature (his desk at this time was piled with the works of leading French poets), his fellow monks frequently complained to the Metropolitan that he was consorting with the devil. A showdown with his ecclesiastical authorities probably precipitated Arghezi's departure in 1905 for Switzerland, where he intended to pursue theological studies at a Cordelier monastery near Fribourg. At this monastery, however, he became disgusted at repeated attempts to convert him to Catholicism, and he left to settle

in Geneva. Enrolling as an apprentice at a trade school, he learned to fashion watch cases, rings, and all manner of gold ornaments. Also at this time, Arghezi made occasional trips by motorcycle to Paris, where he supported himself in true proletarian fashion by humping meat in Les Halles and selling newspapers at street-corners in Montmartre.

Arghezi remained in Switzerland until 1910. He claims to have returned to Romania to clarify his military status, but more probably his return was occasioned by the painful ending of a love affair. His years in Western Europe were by no means wasted; he had read widely from the French classics (particularly Montaigne and Pascal) and deepened immeasurably his understanding of the poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. On the other hand, he seems to have made little or no contact with contemporary French or German poets, presumably because he was not a gregarious man by temperament and because he disliked any form of artistic affectation. What the future might have held for him had he been introduced to Apollinaire and his circle of friends can only be surmised, but Arghezi did have the talent and linguistic resources to establish himself as a major European poet—writing of course in the French language. He also had a keen appreciation for the technical problems faced by artists working in different media. He was an accomplished miniaturist and illustrator. In his youth he had worked as a stonemason, and in the thirties his zeal for the printed word had led him to take the necessary exams to become a master printer. One of the key words he uses to suggest the final stages of literary creation translates as “patterns,” or “typeface.” A recurrent theme in his poetry is the mysterious principle of fecundity that seizes the artist at unexpected moments. Sometimes, this creative disposition takes the form of a beguiling female companion (as in “Stihuri” [Verses], where his evocation of the Muse surpasses even that of Claudel in many details); on other occasions, he attempts to suggest the multifarious nature of the creative act through analogies with painting, sculpture, weaving, and the folk arts. In this way, his concern for the tactile impact of the word closely parallels the interest

that Mallarmé, Rilke, Apollinaire, and other writers showed in the mutual illumination of the arts at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Once back in Romania, Arghezi worked mainly as a journalist, although he had a few poems accepted by the prestigious journal *Viața românească*. He achieved considerable notoriety for his opposition to Romania's participation in the First World War on the side of the Allies. Unlike Tzara, who chose to sit out the war years in Zurich, Arghezi loudly proclaimed his pacifist views. When the German troops occupied Bucharest in 1917, he foolishly collaborated on an occupation newspaper. For this and other so-called treasonable activities he was convicted by a military court after the cessation of hostilities and imprisoned for more than two years (1918-20) at Văcărești, a former monastery on the outskirts of Bucharest.

Released through the good offices of Nicolae Iorga—later to prove one of his most uncompromising critics—Arghezi continued his dual career of journalist and poet. His polemics gradually gave way to a more intensive poetic output, and it was in the mid-twenties that many of his finest poems were first published. Frequently hailed by avant-garde writers (Benjamin Fondane and Ilarie Voronca among them) as a kindred spirit, Arghezi soon became a real force in Romanian poetry. In 1927, when he was already forty-seven years old, he finally published his first collection of poems *Cuvinte potrivite* (Fitting Words). The volume was generally well received, although a number of “established” critics poured scorn on the obscurity and occasional crudeness of poems such as “Blesteme” (Curses), ignoring the rugged tradition of satire in Romanian folklore and biblical literature. Arghezi's arch rival, Ion Barbu, suggested that were the reader to uncover the printed letter of such verses as “Între două nopți” (Between Two Nights) “with their venerable content of ecclesiastical origin,” he would find “sketched out in dregs a dully machined idea, grotesque and banal as a bicycle” (*Ideea europeană*, November 1, 1927). Barbu may have had a point, but his lofty intellect could only view as an impro-

priety the blending of extreme verbal condensation with shanty-town language in a poetry that reflects a strong sense of ancestral continuity, a search for absolutes, and visions of a putrescent world.

The general direction of Tudor Arghezi's poetry at the time he published *Cuvinte potrivite* is obscured by many conflicting tendencies. He had originally intended this volume to be his first and last, but for a definitive poetic statement it is too loose and uneven a compilation. Its most unitary aspect is the program of artistic reform set forth in "Testament," the prefatory poem to the collection. Most postwar critics of Arghezi's verse have assumed "Testament" to be a kind of revolutionary manifesto, and have stressed its links to the writer's anarchist and socialist past. Rather it would be more apt to describe the poem as a moment of self-definition, a moment when the mature poet contemplates and evaluates the extraordinary powers he has acquired as the voice of his people. Demostene Botez noted in a review of *Cuvinte potrivite* that Arghezi presents himself as "one of the chosen, an instrument through which perhaps speak—contrary to his wishes and without his knowledge—those elements of life which as yet we do not know, about which we can scarcely guess" (*Adevărul literar și artistic*, 370, 1928, 1-2). Much the same might be said of other poets of this century, but by alluding to the strange power of the human unconscious to influence the creative process Botez indirectly drew his readers' attention to that sense of ancestral continuity which seemingly transcends the individual experience. The poet's role in "Testament" is apparently limited to transforming the consciousness of his forefathers into words. He is the master craftsman who from the primitive speech-patterns of herdsmen fashions *cuvinte potrivite*, words that not only dovetail into a given design but also are proper and fitting in a particular situation. Just as Alfred de Vigny was the interpreter in "L'Esprit pur" of the noble spirit of the knights-errant who fought in the name of France, so here Arghezi is an intermediary for the suffering of the Romanian peasantry. Curiously, the linguistic reforms he details seem to reverse the normal chronology of the crea-

tive act. Something more is being hinted at, far surpassing the conventional exertions of the *homo faber*, plying chisel and file to the raw materials of consciousness.

It would appear that this linguistic activity occurs in the meeting, at a pre-conceptual level, of the slow-burning wrath of ancestral consciousness with the spirit of individual creativity. Cesare Pavese—whose poetry exhibits a similar concern for man's communal experience—seemed to be referring to precisely this level of subconscious activity when he wrote that "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" (*The Burning Brand*, a translation of *Il mestiere di vivere* by A. E. Murch, New York, 1972, p. 27). Arghezi is concerned with poetry as the transformation of mythic experience—the psychic patrimony of an entire community—into the individual and creative experience of dream. The medium whereby this transformation is effected is of course language. But language is an imperfect instrument, and "Testament" ends on an ambiguous note. With fine irony, the role of the poet as the interpreter of his people's suffering is underlined at the very moment of the reader's passive and incomplete incomprehension. Quite properly, in Arghezi's view, the limitations of art are those of its own making. The poetry of *Cuvinte potrivite* is full of hesitations and ambiguities; Arghezi's favorite technique is to lead the reader through a maze of convoluted ideas and then stand him on his head, in short, the technique of the volte-face. But this first volume is also awash in those "bonds of sympathy" and "biological vagaries" Pavese spoke of. Nowhere is this more true than in a number of poems dealing with sickness, birth, and death ("Lingoare" [Typhoid], and "Buna Vestire" [Annunciation], for example), where facts of everyday existence are implicitly dehumanized and acquire mythic proportions as mysteries unfathomable by the rational mind.

In 1930 Arghezi published the novels *Icoane de lemn* (Wood Icons) and *Poarta neagră* (The Black Gate), based

respectively on reminiscences of his monastic and prison experiences. The volume of poems *Flori de mucigai* (Flowers of Mildew), published in 1931, was also the product of his imprisonment. In this work he broke entirely fresh ground in Romanian literature, depicting with rare sympathy the depraved elements of the prison underworld. This lyrical approach to the seamier side of life brought grave charges of obscenity, but the work was written in the purgative spirit of Villon, and the Rabelaisian coarseness is there precisely to deepen our understanding of the tormented and underprivileged. It is perhaps the most daring and successful cycle of poems ever written by a Romanian. The critic George Călinescu compared it to similar currents in the work of Salvatore di Giacomo and García Lorca, but it may be possible to go further than this and agree with Arne Häggqvist, Arghezi's translator into Swedish, that "in the well-known poems 'Tinca' and 'Rada,' for instance, there are metaphorical outbursts of such brilliance that we can hardly find their equivalent in European literature" (*Romanian Review*, xxii, 3, 1968, 72-73). Contemporary Romanian critics, as might be expected, speak of the volume's stark realism and its indictment of bourgeois society. In doing so, they give the poems a historical function Arghezi never intended. Certainly, he is motivated by a deep sense of injustice; but he is careful to distinguish between those inmates who are quite properly serving sentences for crimes against humanity and those who are there merely through an accident of birth or circumstance. With the exception of the frame poem, Arghezi never speaks directly in his own voice. He employs a narrative device similar to Giovanni Verga's *chorality of voices*: 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 again 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 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 plowman or gypsy. The voice here 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." Some critics have praised the use of a prison dialect, an underworld argot, but there are no such limitations. The colloquialisms Arghezi adopts could be heard even today on street-corners in certain sections of Bucharest. His great achievement in this cycle 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.

The thirties were Arghezi's most productive years. A satirical novel of Swiftian dimensions, *Tablete din Țara de Kutu* (Tablets from Kutu Land), was followed by other novels rich in lexicological innovation: *Ochii Maicii Domnului* (The Blessed Virgin's Eyes, 1934), *Cimitirul Buna-Vestire* (The Annunciation Cemetery, 1936), and *Lina* (1942), as well as by further collections of poetry: *Cărticica de seară* (Evening Verses, 1935) and *Hore* (Horas, 1939). Arghezi reveals in these collections yet another direction to his poetry by affirming the values of family life and reflecting the vision of a pantheist in his childlike obsession with the wonders of creation. It is a microscopic world, where his touch is that of a miniaturist.

In 1938-39, a serious illness confined Arghezi to bed for almost a year. His experiences in the hospital were traumatic and disturbed his interior, private world; he was forced, as when he was imprisoned, to look outward, and he produced a number of excellent poems. The pessimistic attitude of these verses is also reflected in a remarkable series of poems that

treat—sometimes in the flat, unemotional manner of Ungaretti, other times on a note of barely restrained hysteria—the horrors of war, of a war that was steadily encroaching on Romanian territory in 1943 and 1944. Arghezi continued to publish in the war period, mainly poetry and *tablete*, but in April 1943 he began to write articles of a more openly political nature, including the lampoon “Baron!” which, openly aimed at Baron von Killinger, the Nazi ambassador to Bucharest, earned the writer several months detention in a concentration camp at Tîrgu-Jiu, the capital of the Gorj district, ironically his ancestral homeland.

Immediately after the war, Arghezi brought out the volume *Manual de morală practică* (1946), a collection of *tablete* dealing with human relationships in a manner reminiscent of Bertrand Russell’s popular treatises. In 1946, he won the National Poetry Prize for the first time, and in the following year he brought out the volume *Una sută una poeme* (One Hundred and One Poems), which included practically all the poems he had written since 1939. A period of silence (1947–54) bears witness to his uncertainty and misgivings during the Stalinist period in Romania; the poet restricted himself mainly to translations from the Russian and French. In 1955 he published *1907—Peizaje* (1907—Landscapes), a satirical exposé of the conditions that led up to the peasant rising of the same year. This was followed in 1956 by another major poetic cycle *Cîntare omului* (Song to Man), a lyrical evocation of the sociogenic theme. In neither of these cycles is Arghezi at his best. The phrasing and rhyme-endings of this occasional verse remain meticulous, but the subordination of mood and image to a dominant theme is lacklustre and ineffective.

Three major patterns may be discerned in the fabric of Arghezi’s poetry: a search for a supreme being, an exploration of the creative act, and a return *in illo tempore*, a re-experiencing of mythic time. In practice, however, the individual threads that make up these patterns are themselves so interwoven that ultimately one final, metaphysical pattern stands out: man’s search for the Self. Throughout seventy

years of relentless poetic activity, this search takes many forms; the poet is in turn moral theologian, visionary, reformer, sinner, and ardent lover. In a recent monograph, Alexandru George defines Arghezi's world as a kind of somber, sinful, conscious-stricken Middle Ages "that begins with Abelard and ends with François Villon" (*Marele Alpha*, Bucharest, 1970, p. 82). No poet of the modern world, not even Baudelaire or Claudel, has treated the motif of *pribejie* (spiritual exile) with such pathos, or grappled so unavailingly with the problem of human imperfection. George is right to claim that "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" (op. cit., p. 86). But, as we have already seen, even this private, inner world is not entirely immune to incursions from the outside. There are indeed times when the writer is forced by the sheer enormity of historical events to pause in his introspective deliberations and face the horror and degradation around him. By a strange paradox, *actual* confinement—as a prisoner at Văcărești, hospital patient, and political detainee—reduces Arghezi's metaphysical suffering and increases his awareness of the plight of others. To this extent, the prison cell is no longer a means of escaping from life, but a vantage-point, a window onto the world at large.

This claustral reversion is also reflected in the poet's style. 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 image, only to open up amazing perspectives and invite secret new intuitions in the mind of his reader. Few though these moments of commitment and unqualified candor may be in Arghezi's work, they are important for correcting two equally misleading impressions: that the poet is an advocate of solip-

sism and that he is a purveyor of social panaceas. His commitment is to life, to its infinite variety, to the endless confusion that drives men first one way and then another. There are no solutions, there is no escape from the ontological labyrinth in which we are all hopelessly lost. Poetry offers some form of release, through expression of man's deepest aspirations, but even it turns out finally to be an illusion. Arghezi is a poet of every day and age because he stubbornly persists in searching for something he knows he will not find. But he is supremely a poet of the twentieth century, for the techniques of self-effacement and multiple personality he introduces to lyric poetry, for his sudden changes in pace, for his frank sexual imagery, and above all for the fluid movements of Rada's dance.

MICHAEL IMPEY

Pronunciation Guide

ROMANIAN is a Romance language that has preserved certain features from Latin not found in its Western counterparts. Of these, the remnants of a case-system undoubtedly are the biggest stumbling-block to the unwary. Further peculiarities include an agglutinated article (e.g.: "scaun," chair; "scaunul," the chair), which is also found in Albanian and Bulgarian, and the use of subjunctive clauses where verb plus infinitive would usually be the rule in the other Romance languages ("vreau să vorbesc cu tine," I want to speak to you). As far as its vocabulary is concerned, Romanian is a hybrid language: words of Slavic and Greek origin compete with French and Italian borrowings. Nonetheless, readers familiar with Italian, and to a lesser extent with Spanish, Portuguese, or French, should be able to achieve a reasonable approximation of the sound-system with the aid of this Guide.

<i>Romanian Letter</i>	<i>Phonetic Script</i>	<i>Approximate English Equivalent</i>	<i>Romanian Example</i>
a	[a]	always sounded like a in father	"fata" (the girl)
ă	[ə]	around	"măr"
c (+ a,ă,î,o,u)	[k]	cup	"cap"
c (+ e,i)	[ç]	chest	"cer"
che	} [k]	Kent	"chem"
chi		key	"chip"
e	[e]	set	"sete," "epocă"
e	[je]	yes	"este"
g (+ a,ă,î,o,u)	[g]	gun	"gură"
g (+ e,i)	[g̃]	gender	"gem"