

GETTING TO KNOW THE SECRETS OF THE DYING NARCISSUS (DIMITRIE ANGHEL)

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Abstract: Considered by the critics of his time to be "a poet of flowers", Dimitrie Anghel did not allow his poetic work to be permeated by any of the inner turmoil which gradually worsened his manic-depressive illness. Devoured by various physical and psychic complexes, which were favoured by a problematic heredity, augmented by varied sentimental crises, and by twinges of conscience and public condemnation, he finally decided that the only way out for him was to commit suicide.

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Creating literary texts is known to be the biunivocal, more or less perceptible process, through which a writer relates his creation, either deliberately or involuntarily, to his social and psychological life, whilst the latter insinuates itself into his work, sometimes to the point of osmosis. There are also poets for whom creation fulfills an exorcizing role, as their inner turmoils, once transferred into their work, redeems them through catharsis. This fluid transfer of correlations and precise determinations did not apply to Dimitrie Anghel (16 July 1872 – 13 November 1914). His contemporaries testified to his temperamental character being utterly projected into extreme attitudes: from a calm tone and moderate gestures, he would suddenly throw the worst temper tantrums, which made him appear "all restlessness, petulance and blazing heat of stake" (Arghezi 1975: 120). Being aesthetically enamoured with forms, colours and fragrances, as he confessed, his passionate nature, at times unfettered in violent and profound outbursts, did not betray itself in his quantitatively small work, which presented him as a rather discrete and balanced poet, a keen observer of nuances. His high intellectual background (although an untamed and independent teenager with incomplete high school education, he became very efficiently selftaught) and the delicacy of his feelings did not reveal any of the inner troubles of the poet who "shared Don Quixote's ambition and Hamlet's temper: he was both hot-tempered and heavyhearted." (Horodincă 1972: 243)

Dimitrie Anghel started his writing career at the end of the 19th century, at a time when a strong wave of pessimism seized a whole generation of poets after the death of the greatest of the Romanian poets, the romantic Mihai Eminescu. In Dimitrie Anghel's particular case, pessimism was not a mere post-Eminescu pretence, but the sign of a manicdepressive disorder, oppressing a child and, later on, a fragile teenager, traumatized by his being motherless at the age of six and fatherless at sixteen – it is worth mentioning that his mother, in turn, had been orphaned, losing her father at three and her mother at twenty-one. The incomplete artistic achievement of his work did not diminish or render less realistic the intimate and family drama of the author. Although he made his debut in the post-Eminescu age (with verses that were influenced, in his own words, by "the pestilence of an exasperated and monochord sentimentalism," (cf. Dragomirescu 1988: 56), Dimitrie Anghel illustrated the modernist trend which was then on the rise – but, surprisingly enough, he was often less than sympathetic to the change, which shows that he was basically a poet of transition, closely connected with romanticism as he was. Dying romanticism and blooming symbolism clashed

onto and then converged into the serene nature of classicism. Dimitrie Anghel was essentially an isolated writer, impossible to associate with any of the ideologies or literary groups at the turn of the 20th century.

Dimitrie Anghel's literary philosophy was tributary to the 19th century, but his existentialist intuition allowed him to transgress the historical frame of Romanian symbolism. "The writer's deep vocation was represented by a fin-de-siècle aestheticism, cultivated out of conviction and without pretentious display, but with due respect to the local tradition. Anghel realized that, given the particular conditions of Romanian culture, an aesthetic á outrance movement would be out of the question; that is the reason why, following a slow evolution, toward the end of his life, Anghel, who was an admirer of Oscar Wilde and a dismayed spectator of the latter's decline (cf. the 'Oscar Wilde' poem), a close friend of Moréas's and of the French bohemians, joined aestheticism as the ultimate solution" (Zamfir 1981: 283). He committed suicide, ironically so, shortly after the breakout of the First World War, when the long belle époque came to an end and the new clash between the French and the German influences came to permeate inter-war Romanian culture and literature.

Biographers have explained his behaviour as a typical manifestation of a split personality, presenting him as "a modernist in his erotic sensitivity, a homo duplex, equally sensual and sentimental" (Cioculescu 1983: 40), or as an overtly sensitive person, prone to loneliness and daydreaming, and, on the other hand, to spontaneity, aggressiveness and irony. He treated his friends kindly, and rejected those who did not appreciate him highly. Baudelaire once said that Buffon's homo duplex formula encapsulated the psychology of modern, romantic and symbolist artists, whose childhood years drew straight lines between "action and thought, dream and reality." Indeed, the basic elements of Anghel's temperament began to take shape as early as his adolescence: his dual nature was grounded in the antagonistic biological structures of his parents: on the one hand, his mother's fanciful daintiness, on the other hand, his father's practicalmindedness and passionate nature, prone to phantasms and concealing psychological weakness. This genetic heritage was further complicated and aggravated by his rickety health; the malaria brought from the swamps of Cornești, the presumable tuberculosis caught from his mother, as well as the other diseases of his premature erotic adolescence. The excessive care bestowed upon him as the youngest of his family and bearer of his father's name deepened and enhanced such features." (Dragomirescu 1988: 62-63)

"I'm aching and suffering, and I adore my anguish"

Dimitrie Anghel's character and behaviour were built – during the period of profound transformations in his adolescence – against the individualist and rebellious background of his psychic instability and daintiness. His simultaneously violent and daydreaming temperament might also be interpreted in the light of his parents' Eastern origin. George Călinescu (1899 – 1965), the greatest of Romanian critics, characterized him in this way: "He who watches Anghel's face understands these Oriental outbursts: kind, refined, yet bright and visionary, almond-shaped eyes, an incredibly oblong face, like that of a Greek-Spanish hidalgo, resembling El Greco's fanatic physiognomies. His is a Moor's jealousy" (Călinescu 1985: 691). His response to nature, his delicacy and propensity to daydreaming and melancholy were transmitted to him in his early childhood by his mother, Erifilia (Leatris), who had been born in Istanbul, Turkey, and had been raised on an island in the sea of Marmara. "The poet's

inner structure retained something of the nature of a woman living in the exuberant landscape of Bosphorus, near the mysterious whirl of the sea and the fabulous horizon of the Orient” (Vîrgolici 1965: 7). It is interesting that the poet himself contemplated his maternal heredity and described himself as a refined and keenly sensitive, a strange, tormented and unstable spirit; above all, he mentioned his love of poetry and thirst for love. Similarly, in another self-portrait in the *Fantome / Ghosts* volume, he wrote: “I was a sad, withdrawn child, with blue devils, and, devoid of a spiritual life at that time, I would not know how to inhabit my loneliness and I was frightened of it” (apud Dragomirescu 1988: 26). As a child, Anghel used to hold up against his father not only the untimely death of his mother, whose precarious health he had inherited, but also his indifference to her memory. His antagonism towards his pragmatic father was to generate a genuine cult for the affective connotations of objects.

As to his father (an enterprising Macedo-Romanian sharecropper and landowner, reputed for having introduced rice culture in Romania), his going bankrupt later in life led to his final institutionalization in a mental hospital. After his death and the distribution of his fortune among his children (three boys and a girl), the “puppy” of the family, Dimitrie, converted all his goods into ready money and moved to Paris, where he lived from 1893 to 1902, after a short stay in Rome, where he had fallen seriously ill with typhoid fever. While in Paris, even though he wasted his youth and inheritance in bouts of bohemian hedonism, in reveries consumed in parks and literary cafes, or in cheap rendez-vous with fallen women, he also indulged in reading. He met Paul Verlaine, who was nearing the end of his life, and Oscar Wilde, declining as well.

All through these years, Anghel published nothing in French, engaged in no friendships and never attended any literary groups. Another characteristic of his was now moulded, to be conspicuous shortly: his disdain for moral criteria, under the influence of some theories inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche’s vitalist philosophy – at a certain moment, he was planning to write a Nietzschean drama to exempt the superego, that is, the artist, from the constraints of enfranchized morality. Mention must now be made of the scandal whose protagonist he was and which exposed him to the public opprobrium of the excessively puritan Romanian society of those times: the seduction of and subsequent marriage to the wife of his best friend and literary collaborator, the poet and translator Ștefan Octavian Iosif (1875 – 1913). The temperamental character, education and literary creeds of the two poets were fundamentally different – Iosif’s German background coming into contact with Anghel’s French education. Thus, whilst the doleful Ștefan Octavian Iosif wrote tradition-minded poetry, the fiery Dimitrie Anghel entertained conflicting states and was a refined aesthete. Under a penname joining them together, some stimulating rhyming and humorous chronicles entitled *Caleidoscopul lui A. Mirea / A. Mirea’s Calendar* came out for some years until one day in 1910, when Anghel confessed to Iosif that he was madly in love with his wife – the beautiful and voluptuous Natalia Negru – and by dint of an erotic either/or, worthy of the romantic age, he challenged his friend to a duel.

“Friendship is nothing but a wasted form of romance”

The intimacy of the demoniac Anghel to Natalia Negru, a poetess by aspiration even if not by vocation, grew slowly amidst the literary collaboration with her husband – a collaboration that can also be interpreted as an opportunity for Anghel to be more frequently in her proximity. Some of the texts written in collaboration with Iosif can actually be seen as

the barely disguised evidence of his love for Natalia, which unleashed in the poet an intense creative energy. According to Natalia Negru's confession, she was seduced in 1909, "at a commemoration of Eminescu, in Botoșani... before our return, I dressed as an abbess and I had a photograph taken. That fantasy was fatal to me." (apud Dragomirescu 1988: 206 – 207)

It is not our intention to interpret what followed through name symbolism ("Natalia" semantically refers to "birth" and the family name, "Negru," means "black" in Romanian), but the ensuing events can be considered to be ill-fated. "The vivid imagination of Anghel the poet was dominated by a woman's phantasm felt as an otherness that was simultaneously extending his mother's presence and becoming an integral part of himself. This phantasm exerted from the very beginning a rather dark fascination that threatened to become, one day, the irresistible call of death. The aesthetic ideal ingrained in his life and art, the aerial yet exacting spirit of his mother finally became, through the mysterious magic of inverting contraries, the black queen: death borrowed the poetic figure of the mother, maternity adopted the stern and eternal appearance of death. Poetry as assumed destiny often worked such insidious mutations. Gérard de Nerval, a member of the family of kindred spirits that included Anghel, described this course of life taken by all the poets inspired by the spirit of a deceased young woman with an aura of maternal kindness and beauty" (Horodincă 1972: 89).

After Natalia Negru's divorce from Iosif and her marriage to Anghel ("the angel"), the inferno of the choleric married couple started afresh, fired by disputes, activated by physical violence and mutual bouts of jealousy, the wife being banned from leaving house, with reiterated intentions of getting a divorce expressed by both parties, followed by "angelic" reconciliations that helped them pick up strength for future fights. "They were, indeed, tarred by the same brush, equal in force, both reluctant to yield primacy to the other one and seeing in each other the mirror of their own inner struggles. They loved and hated each other because they were so much alike, because they knew each other inside out, they knew each other's weapons and strength, and because they saw in the other one their own image, distorted by stubbornness, ambition, poisoned by jealousy and exasperated by their inability to free themselves, to find escape or balance" (Horodincă 1972: 128). They were rumoured to have exchanged roles in this marriage triangle... of equal legs, in the sense that the coquettish and wilful Natalia Negru was not faithful to her second husband either, cheating on the latter with Iosif himself. It is at that time that Anghel began the hard battle for the definitive conquest of the vacillating and domineering Natalia, who was of two minds for at least one year, about having the humble and indulgent love of her former husband or the possessive and insane love shown by the former family friend – a well-mannered and wellgroomed dandy, for whom "friendship was nothing but a wasted form of romance." (Horodincă 1972: 92)

Dimitrie Anghel was a poet not only by vocation, but also because of his natural need of turning his life and environment into poetry. That is the reason why, when a fire burst out in the building where he was living in Bucharest and burned his belongings, books, manuscripts and personal valuables (especially his photographs), his mental health deteriorated so badly that he needed institutionalization in a psychiatric ward. He became extremely irritable, and felt, with or without reason, that he was the target of gossip and irony in newspapers or in cafés on account of his "wrong" marriage. He responded to all of the

attacks, be they real or imaginary, with disproportionate violence. The fact that Ștefan Octavian Iosif died of brain congestion, further enhanced his remorse pangs and completely ruined his spiritual balance (“Iosif’s death was a quasi-suicide, Anghel’s suicide was a quasimurder” – Horodincă 1972: 124). In this context, it is worth mentioning that, on hearing the news of Iosif’s death, a good friend of his, the literary critic Ilarie Chendi, committed suicide by throwing himself out of a window of the hospital where he had been ward for paralysis in the wake of a similar congestion – both writers suffering from the disease of the moment: syphilis.

According to the testimonies of those who knew Anghel during his last years, his suicide did not come as a desperate act or as a fatal accident caused by lack of self-control. His insomnia, extreme depression, addiction to medicines, domestic strife and remorse over the death of the friend he had betrayed, they all took a strong hold on his decisions and strengthened his conviction that there was no way out but taking his life. It all happened as if in a romantic plot, in 1914, on his name day (on 26 October, Saint Dumitru, in the Orthodox liturgical calendar) but we could see nothing here of a symbolical gesture of existential rejection of his patronym and of his father. At that moment, in the course of a domestic strife, Anghel fired his gun at his wife as a warning, as she intended to leave the room and desert him – again. The bullet recoiled on Natalia’s calf from the metallic bedside and inflicted a superficial wound. Terrified at the thought of having mortally wounded her, Anghel got into a Shakespearean scenario, shot himself and seriously injured one Dimitrie Anghel of his lungs. Once hospitalized and saved, seeing that his wife would not visit him – her parents concealing all the letters in which he was begging her to see him –, he refused all medical care, ripped off his bandages and died on 13 November 1914. The femme fatale, Natalia Negru, outlived both her husbands by half a century and died in her eighties in 1963, at an age equal to the sum of the years lived by the two.

“If need be, at point blank distance”

Dimitrie Anghel was reportedly an irritable and annoying guy, always falling prey to the fits of a choleric temper. “With his deeply creased cheeks, his head thinning all over, his throaty and hoarse voice, with his spontaneous and impulsive character, the poet carried about him a touch of distinction, gentility and chivalry, soon dissipated by his violence and aggressiveness”; he had a “point of honour he would defend in editorial offices, if need be, with his gun thrown on the table” (Lovinescu 1970: 126). This is the very reason why the literary community was shocked at his suicidal act, at the consistent histrionism of his suicidal behaviour, enacted in committing suicide per se: “Dimitrie Anghel lived a tragedy by unwarily appealing to the inadequate means of slap-stick comedy: adultery, pathetic letters and gun shots. In following his alarms and excursions, his contemporaries felt like spectators in a play by Caragiale in an open-air performance, and were perplexed when the farce suddenly turned into tragedy.” The poet’s death, as reported in the newspapers, produced an “enormous sensation.” Nobody at all expected such an ending. His passionate storm was perceived as a comic show. “Iosif, the first who had been summoned to fight arm in hand for the chivalresque winning of Natalia’s favours, had not found this solution acceptable. Cuckolded, abandoned and pathetic as he was, Iosif had never been ridiculous, whereas Anghel, the demoniac seducer, the witty and poignant trend setter was continually exposed to ridicule. And yet, just like in a Dürrenmatt farce, the comedy of Anghel’s life ended

tragically. His destiny was more than dramatic: it was modern, because he was a modern naive, risible but outspoken hero, as faked as Eugen Ionescu's Béranger." (Horodincă 1972: 242 – 243)

Dimitrie Anghel's life was like an inconstant flame, artistically sublimated: at times flickering in the minor mode of melancholy, at other times tinged with high dramatic tones. In the absence of any immediate utilitarian ambitions, he seems to have taken an existential course similar to the ephemeral life of decorative flowers, which is fatally linked to the fate of the self-loving Narcissus – cynically so, a suicide suited for a "poet of flowers" would have been by asphyxia, by filling the bedroom with lilies. His temperamental drives betrayed his individualistic and anarchic inner structure of romantic origin. Poetry and death, rather than love, are the two poles between which his personal poetic mythology developed. Aggressive and yet downfallen, ambitious but afflicted by physical complexes – his mental inconsistency apparently affecting his physical consistency, too –, psychologically inhibited, emotionally overloaded and neurasthenic, Dimitrie Anghel finally came to wish his death. His morally complex and contradictory portrait is illustrative of the specific spiritual tribulations experienced by the soul of a modern man and creator, his case must be treated individually, but in the context of his obvious manic-depressive illness, which led him to some blatant indiscriminatio concerning himself and his social relations.

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