

From the Dissolution of the Anima to the End of All Things (The Question of Death in Poetry and Gothic Music)

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Abstract: In the present paper I analyze the theme of death in Gothic Metal songs such as *Forever Failure* (1995) by Paradise Lost, *Everything Dies* (1999) by Type O Negative, *The Hanged Man* (1998) by Moonspell or *Gone with The Sin* (1999) by HIM. The subthemes I am mostly interested in are the death of anima, the suicide of the self and the universal death. Several Romanian poets – Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), Iuliu Cezar Săvescu (1866-1903), George Bacovia (1881-1957) and D. Iacobescu (1893-1913), who all have in common the pursuit of nihilism – used death to enhance their nihilist poetical universe. I will trace the aforementioned subthemes in some of their most spectacular poems.

Keywords: death-in-life, death of the anima, Gothic Metal music, *Liebestod*, nihilist poetry, personal apocalypse, romanticism, symbolism.

1. Death of the Anima

The Romantic poet Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) conceives in his early poem *Mortua est* (1871) the death of the anima as the absolute destruction of meaning. The Romanian writer imagines the scene of mourning in the manner of Novalis, reminding us also of Edvard Grieg's *Death of Aase*. The poetic self rises in a Schopenhauerian way from the subjective level of solipsistic misery to the objective level of universal contemplation, ascending to a kind of eagle eye's perspective of existential *sapientia* (like Hamlet, he is discerning between life and death):

O, death is a chaos, an ocean of stars gleaming,
While life is a quagmire of doubts and of dreaming,
Oh, death is an aeon of sun-blazoned spheres,
While life but a legend of wailing and tears. (transl. Corneliu M. Popescu¹)
(Eminescu 2014, 67)

We have here an amplification of death in three steps that is significant for my whole article: (1) death of the anima implies the (2) suicide of the self and this personal apocalypse presupposes the (3) end of everything. First the anima dies

¹ Available at: <http://www.estcomp.ro/eminescu/mortua.html>.

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in Romantic fashion, the personal self follows, universal death being the third and final phase.

Through my head beats a whirlwind, a clamorous wrangle
Of thoughts and of dreams that despair does entangle;
For when suns are extinguished and meteors fail
The whole universe seems to mean nothing at all. (italics mine, transl. Corneliu M. Popescu²) (Eminescu 2014, 67)

The presence of death (first as the death of the loved one, last as universal death) is coupled with meaninglessness (“To exist! O, what nonsense, what foolish conceit.”). If death exists, life is only a forgery, a sort of prelude of death, a *living death*. The poetic self will experience *the ordeal of nihilism* (the “uncanniest of all guests”) (Nietzsche 1968, 7) as the state of decomposition of meaning (“the aim is lacking; ‘why’ finds no answer”) (Nietzsche 1968, 9) and as decentering and moving away from the ‘first principle’: “Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the center toward X.” (Nietzsche 1968, 9) Nihilism is more than a way of seeing (and fighting) the world, in its interiority nihilism being equivalent to anti-theism, a method of conceiving (and fighting) God. That is why Eminescu’s poetic self, after experiencing the nihilist destruction of meaning, becomes an atheist. A universe where *her* death and *my* death are possible is a territory deprived of God’s light, a fallen Gnostic sub-world ruled by ‘decreators’ and ‘snakes.’

O, what is the meaning? What sense does agree?
The end of such beauty, had that what to be?
Sweet seraph of clay where still lingers life’s smile,
Just in order to die did you live for a while?

O, tell me the meaning. This angel or clod?
I find on her forehead no witness of God. (transl. Corneliu M. Popescu³)
(Eminescu 2014, 68)

The Post-Symbolist poet George Bacovia (1881-1957) re-writes *Mortua est* in his masterpiece *Lead* (1902). One could call Bacovia an essentialist or a minimalist: his poems are extremely precise and deprived of all the unnecessary embroidery.

Upturned my lead beloved lay asleep
On the lead flower ... and I began to call –
I stood alone by the corpse ... and it was cold ...
And the wings of lead drooped. (tr. Peter Jay⁴) (Bacovia 2001, 34)

Bacovia’s imagery is extremely depressive, almost psychotic. The ‘lead beloved’ lies ‘upturned’ and the poetic self stands ‘alone by the corpse.’ The

² Available at: <http://www.estcomp.ro/eminescu/mortua.html>.

³ Available at: <http://www.estcomp.ro/eminescu/mortua.html>.

⁴ Available at: <http://www.aboutromania.com/bacovia1.html>.

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severe heaviness of 'lead' (melancholy and depression) brings along a sort of schizoid coldness, an impression of isolation (1) between the self and anima (she is a 'corpse'), (2) between the self and world (the self is 'alone'), (3) between the self and self (everything is 'upturned,' 'the wings ... drooped'). Something snaps in the poetical character's brain: the poet senses anxiously the advent of insanity.

The Swedish Doom Gothic Metal band Draconian, in the track *She Dies* (2006), reminds us both of Eminescu (the liaison between self and anima) and Bacovia (the coldness that separates the two):

This lovelorn kiss of death in lugubrious silence
Dawn breaks open like a wound and the dreadful sun

Two souls entwined together,
still so alone.
Both you and I are shattered
and frozen in stone. (Draconian, 2006)

Eminescu's *Liebestod* (Wagner's Romantic expression of 'love-death') is reversed by the Finnish gothic rock band HIM, in one of their most renown videos, *Gone with the Sin* (1999). If the Romantic poets used to mourn for their loved ones, the Post-Romantic musicians would cherish the dying of the loved ones, searching for the point "where love and death embrace," to quote another single by HIM. Love = death: Wagner, Eminescu, Novalis and Shelley would agree to it.

I love your skin oh so white
I love your touch cold as ice
And I love every single tear you cry
I just love the way you're losing your life

I adore the despair in your eyes
I worship your lips once red as wine
I crave for your scent sending shivers down my spine
I just love the way you're running out of life (HIM, 1999)

Love is a sort of a personal death (I die while worshipping the other) and at the same time death has a kind of mysterious purity (while life is generally trivial) that unites it with love. Moreover, in HIM's interpretation of the Wagnerian *Liebestod*, death is seen as a fulfillment of love, a co-participation in a heightened state of being (we can observe this in their hit, *Join Me in Death*).

And we've waited for so long
For this moment to come
Was so anxious to be together
Together in death (HIM, 1999)

One can say that the only mirror of the absolute of love is the absolute of death. In other words, on the heights of erotic ecstasy the sole transcendence is the abyss of death: the rest is nothing else than bourgeois banality or the decrepitude of everydayness. A fact known to poets from of all times: Romeo and

Juliet, Tristan and Isolde escape the separateness of individuality and the subject-object dualism, making love on the shrine of death. This fundamental idea is present in many Gothic Metal songs: "In our heavenly rapture we die on and on," "I'm waiting for you to drown in my love," "I taste death in every kiss we share/ Every sundown seems to be the last we have/ Your breath on my skin has the scent of our end," "It's not our fault if death's in love with us .../ It's not our fault if the reaper holds our hearts" (HIM), "Loving you was loving the death," "Now close those eyes and let me love you to death" (Type O Negative), "And as we lay, we kissed/ Fingers wet with poison/ Thinking to each one/ There is beauty in death" (Moonspell), and so on. For a limitless love, the only logical limit is death.

2. Suicide of the Self

For the second step of the death or suicide of the self, let us compare two works with the same title (with a brief incursion into the nihilism of Dostoevsky and Tiamat): one by the Symbolist poet Iuliu Cezar Săvescu (1866-1903) and the other by the Portuguese Gothic Metal band, Moonspell. The name of the poem/song is *The Hanged Man*.

In Săvescu's poem, which has Symbolist influences (one senses the imprint of Baudelaire and Lautréamont) but also a Gothic and Romantic touch (one might name Byron, Musset or Mary Shelley), the 'self killer' renounces Christ, becoming 'a martyr of Satan' (to quote Saint Bruno's expression).

At the village church
One icon has fallen
The very icon of Christ
Because in the cold high night
Swiftly passes Satan
Cursing.

And we remember from the old
That under moldy stone
He is buried long before
The man who dared first
To end himself and die

Hanging. (transl. mine) (Săvescu 2015, 125)

Suicide becomes – in Săvescu's poem – a sort of dark martyrdom: despite being an act of courage, it may also be understood as a way of embracing absolute damnation. The idea of the Romanian poet seems to contradict a brilliant intuition of the Swedish Death Doom Gothic Metal band Tiamat, who in their track *The Sleeping Beauty* (1992), wrote that "suicide could be the key/ To the place called paradise" (Tiamat, 1992). We can grasp both Săvescu's and Tiamat's convictions. The Romanian poet seems to be implying that the suicide belongs in hell with his master Satan because he transgressed the conventional territory of Christianity (when he destroyed his own body, the self murderer obliterated the

God within, that's why the Church hates him and is ashamed of him). The Swedish band seems to say that if I killed myself, I would be my own master, my own decreator, my own God and if I killed myself at the peak of my life, without regrets and without tears, I would *die high* and gain access to my own private paradise: Ego would become the Self beyond good and evil. We can see that suicide, depending on how one uses, may be either a method of damnation or salvation.

Tiamat's insights remind us of the reflections of a famous suicide from literature, Dostoevsky's Kirillov, a literary character frequently compared to nihilists such as Nietzsche or Cioran. If nihilism can be defined as a philosophical reaction to the meaninglessness of life (no life can have absolute meaning as long as death brutally ends it: death cuts us off so decisively that one almost has the feeling that we have never existed), the dark wisdom of Kirillov is introduced in two of fragments. First of all, he claims that life = death = 0. While optimists argue under the umbrella of common sense that life is a plus and death a minus, and pessimists such as Schopenhauer, Leopardi, Byron or Eminescu reversed the formula, Kirillov observes that neither life, nor death, have a significant value or a positive quality. For a nihilist, life is a disguised form of death, an illusion created by nonbeing, and death only a confirmation of nothingness.

Nihilistic freedom comes to us when we grasp that life = death = 0. "There will be entire freedom when it makes no difference whether one lives or does not live." (Dostoevsky 1995, 115) But to choose freedom, Dostoevsky teaches us that elsewhere, is to reject happiness. Because happiness is the bribe of destiny: as long as we are happy, we adore life and dread death. If we chose freedom over happiness, we would despise the servitude of life and happiness and attain a sort of ontological coldness, an initiation in the *adiaphoria* of nihilism.

Second of all, Kirillov anticipates the Nietzschean death of God, imagining a strange history of future nihilism:

God is the pain of the fear of death. He who overcomes pain and fear will himself become God. Then there will be a new life, a new man, everything new... Then history will be divided into two parts: from the gorilla to the destruction of God, and from the destruction of God to ... to the physical changing of the earth and man. Man will be God and will change physically. (Dostoevsky 1995, 115)

The key of the fragment is the definition of God as "the pain of fear of death": the fear of death is considered sacred in our society; fear (of death) is our God, because it is our *numinosum*, our most precious possession, our Achilles heel. One can claim, such as Epicurus, that death is nothing, but – condensing our hopes, our loves, our lives – fear of death becomes everything. Our entire culture is built upon pain + fear + death. Moreover, one can see that in Kirillov *suicide* (and in Tiamat's song as well), *sui* is emphasized and not *caedes*. Personalized *suicide* becomes another kind of death, a sort of super-death. Fighting against the iron dictatorship of the instinct of self-preservation and killing the pain of the

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fear of death (our mantra: “I fear, therefore I am”), the suicide becomes basically a sort of new god. Killing fear, the suicide becomes I in death. One can almost say that the suicide kills death.

Moving on, let us pay attention to Moonspell’s erotic and esoteric song (perhaps inspired by Pessoa and Crowley):

Put your arms around my neck
just like a pathetic lace of death
displays like a tarot deck
I am the card of the hanged man

Put your lace around my face
just like a fairytale
through the blank of my closed eyes
you can foresee the rope within...

And it makes you wanna ride
through the fake suicide of someone
already dead inside (Moonspell, 1998).

Moonspell’s *The Hanged Man* is an existential posture (*asana*), a *Weltanschauung* from the reversed position of the ‘hanged man.’ Seeing the world from the corner of the Other is *seeing what no one else sees*, the esoteric *essence of existence* that comes to some of us like lightning, changing us from the core. *Suicide* becomes a metaphor of initiation, and death becomes a necessary step to the *second life* of the spirit. Is the man hanged or is the whole world hanging? *Death in life* becomes a prelude to genuine, *real life*. We have to use the corrosive forces of death carefully; we have to be pierced by *nigredo* in order to be transmuted into the authentic *lapis*.

There will come a time when we will have to choose between initiation and nihilism, between the anguished spleen of the Symbolists (and Dumitru Iacobescu (1893-1913) is one of the finest ones) and the ‘erotic alchemy’ presented by the Postmodern Moonspell. What would we choose: Moonspell’s amorous rope or Iacobescu’s decadent noose?

Nothing sacred. Nothing good. No rhythm
Just a taste of solar idleness
Along with an especially long decadence
And a noose – unable to break your neck. (transl. mine) (Iacobescu 2014, 16)

3. The Death of Everything

Three poetical fragments will present to us this passing from the theme of the death of anima and the suicide of the self to the apprehension of the total apocalypse. The first one comes from Bacovia’s poem *July* (1916):

There are some dead in the town, darling,
And I came to tell you just that;

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On the bier, because of the heat in town –
Slowly the corpses rot.

The living, with flesh drenched in sweat
From the heat, also move in decay;
There's a stench of corpses, my darling,
And even your breasts wilt today. (tr. Peter Jay⁵) (Bacovia 2001, 51)

A sort of dystopian feeling of deathless death, an impression that no one else is alive, seems to influence these verses. Moreover, one might wonder whether the narrating self and his 'darling' are anything but ghosts (and whether Death writes the poem with Bacovia's hand). If life is essentially death ("slowly the corpses rot," "there's a stench of corpses"), we must ask ourselves what really death is.

Another Post-Symbolist anthem by Bacovia, *Pulvis* (1916) seems to answer the aforementioned question: what is the nature of death? The four terms that comprise our *chaosmos* ('immensity,' 'eternity,' 'chaos' and 'void') are synonyms of *insanity*. One could say that if our manifold universe or lawless *chaosmos* ('chaos' + 'cosmos' i.e. universe + abyss) is an aberration and an imbalance of the original *cosmos*, *insanity* as an aberration and derangement of the usual norm is the new law of being. Thus, we would all understand the nature of death only in our insanity.

Immensity, eternity,
You, chaos, who gather everything ...
In your void is insanity –
You make us all insane. (tr. Peter Jay⁶) (Bacovia 2001, 50)

Bacovia is too close to Postmodernism to understand universal death with other statements than ironic ones: we must go back to Eminescu's Romantic ode of nothingness *Memento mori* (1871) to see the nihilist apocalypse that welcomes absolute destruction:

May death expand its colossal wings upon the world:
Only darkness is the coat of buried waste.
A lingering star extinguishes its small spring.
Deathlike time spreads its arms and becomes eternity.
When nothing will persist on the barren landscape
I will ask: What of your power, Man? – Nothing!! (transl. mine) (Eminescu 1993, 125-6)

We usually forget that our everyday 'time' is 'deathlike' and that it can become the dark eternity that will swallow our world; we easily forget that in reality we live the Beckettian 'zero hour,' the hour of nihilism and nothingness, the hour of 'to live is to die,' the hour of the chaos who will 'make us all insane.'

⁵ Available at: <http://www.aboutromania.com/bacovia23.html>.

⁶ Available at: <http://www.aboutromania.com/bacovia22.html>.

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Eminescu unites the gloomy apocalypse of Byron's *Darkness* with Cioran's Post-Romantic 'death of everything' from *A Short History of Decay*. After reading his poem/poems one can only think of Dresden, Hiroshima or Chernobyl.

In contemporary Metal music, this 'zero hour' of universal destruction is sung by many artists. I will name only three. The British band Paradise Lost, who co-created the Gothic Metal subgenre, in their 1995 song and video *Forever Failure* have these splendid lyrics indicative of a sort of passive nihilism:

Are you forever?
Loss of purpose in a passive life
Are you forever?
Pale, regarded as a waste of time (Paradise Lost, 1995)

This melancholic chorus, combined with the sorrowful melody and the repressed anger that makes this song more powerful, all transform *Forever Failure* in the absolute funeral anthem. The alternative metal artist Marilyn Manson has an interesting vision of apocalypse in his track *In the Shadow of the Valley of Death* (2000), seeing death as a total God that usurps and destroys everything:

Death is policeman
Death is the priest
Death is the stereo
Death is a TV
Death is the Tarot
Death is an angel and
Death is our God
killing us all (Marilyn Manson, 2000)

To say that death is a 'policeman,' a 'priest,' a 'TV' or an executioner is to claim that death is – not unlike God – a metonymy of absolute control, a merciless hegemon that collects tribute from us all. I will end this article with the lyrics of the video *Everything Dies* (1999) by the American gothic band Type O Negative (what is most impressive about this song is that – despite the message – the simple chorus *Everything Dies* is not entirely unhappy: if we listen to it carefully we also hear a ceremonial and an almost exulting and liberating tone):

My ma's so sick
She might die
Though my girl's quite fit
she will die
Still looking for someone
Who was around
Barely coping
Now I hate myself
Wish I'd die

Everything dies (Type O Negative, 1999)

By Way of Conclusion

Comparing two fields less researched in this combination (mainly Romanian nihilist poetry from the late 19th century and Gothic Metal Music especially from the late 20th century) we have seen how the theme of death did not seem to evolve in our (Post)Modernity. The death of anima (a favorite subtheme of the Romantic poets like Goethe, Lermontov or Novalis, who seem to experience the disaster of losing the loved one with such intensity) will not disappear from the history of our mentalities as long as the concept of 'Romantic love' lives on. From Wagners's *Liebested* to HIM's *Join Me in Death* is only a small step and we have seen how love and death are correlated, almost equivalent. The second subtheme, the suicide of the self, evolves from the motif of the death of the anima and I have argued – with the Gothic Metal band Tiamat and Dostoevsky's nihilistic character Kirillov – that suicide may become a way of accessing our personal paradise. Finally, the subtheme of the universal death (treated not only by Romanian poets such as Eminescu and Bacovia but also by authors like Byron, Jean Paul or Lautréamont) has huge echoes in the contemporary apocalyptic Metal music: Paradise Lost, Type O Negative and Marilyn Manson dedicated some of the most beautiful melodic poems to the deity of Death. I have named this obsession with dying and destruction 'the zero hour' in the manner of Samuel Beckett.

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