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## **Leonid Dimov: Spectrality and the Neo-Gothic Atmosphere**

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**Abstract:** This study deals with the neo-Gothic and spectral features of Leonid Dimov's poetry (1926-1987). There is a deliberately abstruse dimension in Dimov's poetry, which confounds and baffles the reader for the very reason that beyond its bulimic fantasies and extravagant constructs, there is a peculiar intention in the subtext: Dimov's poems (those that are vast, narrative) represent a kind of mysteries and initiations into para-worlds, lucidly undertaken through neo-Gothic devices that are at least partially assumed and through linguistic means that are characteristic of a sort of postmodern baroque. There is a quest at stake, as Dimov reveals himself to be playfully anxious, quasi-neurotic; his carnivalesque propensities are never devoid of purpose, but are based on deep anxieties and concerns about death, love, knowledge and creation.

**Keywords:** Leonid Dimov; Oneiric Poetry; Neo-Gothic; Mysteries Initiation; Para-Worlds; Quest.

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For a long time, Romanian literary critics considered Leonid Dimov (1926-1987) to be an eccentric, peculiar poet, a mannerist tributary either to the highly polished, narrative poetic style of Tudor Arghezi, or to the hermetic poetic style of Ion Barbu. During the communist regime in Romania (until 1989), critics approached Dimov's work as marked by explosive lexical torque, by fascinating carnivalesque imagery and remarkable imaginative force. Despite the praise the poet received, because he was labeled as exotic and atypical in the Romanian communist context, Dimov was not placed at the forefront of Romanian contemporary poetry. His work was reconsidered after the collapse of the communist regime, when he was acknowledged – alongside another exotic introverted Romanian poet, Mircea Ivănescu – as a poet of depth, eclipsing, to some extent, the universally accepted dominance of Nichita Stănescu's poetry (in the communist period).

During his life, Leonid Dimov published thirteen books and two anthologies. After 1989, Dimov's poems were re-edited, either as republished individual volumes or in anthologies, but the first professional edition of his complete works was

published by Ion Bogdan Lefter, at Paralela 45 Press, under the title *Leonid Dimov. Opera poetică (Leonid Dimov. Poetic Works)*<sup>1</sup>.

In what follows, I will present a brief critical overview of Leonid Dimov's work, highlighting three Romanian literary critics from the post-communist period who have assessed the poet's oeuvre.

In "Leonid Dimov, 'oniric' postmodern" ("Leonid Dimov, the postmodern 'oneiric'"), written as a preface to *Leonid Dimov, Opera poetică*, vol. I), Ion Bogdan Lefter distances himself from the neo-modernist critics who, during the communist regime, placed Dimov under the umbrella of Tudor Arghezi's and Ion Barbu's influence, deeming him to be a mere "juggler with language" and a "*poeta artifex*".<sup>2</sup> Ion Bogdan Lefter refuses to look at Dimov's poetry through the lens of the modernist canon. Instead, he regards him as a poet who straddled the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> This is why he considers Dimov to be similar to another marginal poet (amply and spectacularly recuperated after the collapse of the communist regime), Mircea Ivănescu, despite the fact that modernist criticism thought them to be different, devoid of any poetic affinities. Bogdan Lefter detects a certain degree of authenticity in the aesthetic oneirism practiced by Dimov, an authenticity that turned fantasy into a hybrid reality,<sup>4</sup> and releases the poet from the strictly oneiric frames through which he has generally been perceived.

In her monograph based on her doctoral thesis, Luminița Corneanu identifies the key themes in the poetry of Leonid Dimov: the journey (as an overarching theme), sexuality, gastronomy, death, all of these being frequently intertwined.<sup>5</sup> The

voyage is analyzed as a spectacle and as "*theatrum mundi*", but also, canonically, as an initiation into the afterlife.<sup>6</sup> Luminița Corneanu talks about three stages in the Dimov's poetry: the surreal-ludic poems of the first period, the oneiric poems of the second period and the mythical-allegorical poems of the third period.<sup>7</sup>

According to Corin Braga, Dimov's poetry is situated between oneirism (reverie, hallucination, phantasm) and Barbu's influence (hermeticism), but it also includes a penchant for balladry, in the manner of Radu Stanca, a poet that is relatively forgotten now.<sup>8</sup> Corin Braga considers Dimov's masterpieces as "neo-Gothic fairy tales"<sup>9</sup> and points to the paradox encapsulated by the poet: he is a lucid oneiric poet, a cogent goldsmith or jeweler who, by virtue of the oneiric poetic aesthetics theorized especially by Dumitru Țepeneag (and by Dimov himself), creates "an *à rebours* alliance between the heated, misty atmosphere of dreams and the translucent, freezing air of cold reason".<sup>10</sup> As an author, Dimov shares one feature with nineteenth-century poets, namely, the simultaneous presence of "over-deliriousness" and "hyper-lucidity".<sup>11</sup> Dimov does not transcribe, but composes and produces (spectacularly and powerfully, with a miraculous talent): "The trance, inspiration, hallucination and delirium are not experienced or lived, but imitated and reproduced in keeping with an imaginative protocol designed during a full state of lucid awareness".<sup>12</sup> Corin Braga insists on the way in which Dimov deployed compensatory worlds and imaginary universes, as shields of protection from the socio-political and human realities of his times, through various methods: Bacchic euphoria, reverie, creation.<sup>13</sup> Braga

considers that the poet's lucid diurnal self was contaminated and impregnated by nocturnal phantasms, materializing in a hybrid structure (even alchemical, I would say), through a process of "soothing his diurnal consciousness".<sup>14</sup> The poetic mood is, thus, in Dimov's case, a mixture of the diurnal and the nocturnal and of the real and the phantasmatic, the mundane being entwined with the ethereal.

### Theory and Directions

The principal theorist of the oneiric movement in Romania was Dumitru Țepeneag. Leonid Dimov followed in his footsteps, explaining, whenever he felt necessary, particularly in poetry, why aesthetic oneirism was predicated on certain formal requirements and why dreams were not necessarily dreams *per se*, but, in his case, invented dreams, patterned after oneiric structures. In what follows I will analyze a few seminal statements made by Leonid Dimov, included in the anthology *Momentul oniric (The Oneiric Moment)*, since they explain, in the subtext, the mechanisms of his poetry and his aesthetic creed.

In the article "Preambul" ("Preamble", published in the magazine *Luceafărul*, no. 27, July 1968), Dimov refers to the oneiric (literary) creation. He mentions "a reshuffling of perfectly real organizers, in an ever new topology", where "the most complex transformations occur instantly, almost magically".<sup>15</sup> What the oneiric artist is interested in, thus, is to create a new topology in poetry, a new space for placing and structuring images, but starting from the reality, not working outside it. Dimov excludes, at least for now, the dream as nebulous, unconscious matter, with which

he could work; he favors the tools of reality, even if they imitate the workings of dreams. Still, the poetry Dimov defines is not realistic, but reorganized, restructured. "The oneiric element acquires the right to permeate poetry only when the dream starts being interpreted. The key to dreams is more *oneiric* than the dream itself".<sup>16</sup> What is or what does poetry become in Dimov's conception? A key to dreams, a reorganization and restructuring of dreams, through lyrical narratives and imitated structures. The interpretation of dreams is actually lyrical narrativization. Within the realm of aesthetic oneirism, the most spectacular texts are Dimov's narrative poems. Most of them are pure masterpieces.

On the other hand, in the same article, the author refuses the passivity of conventional, canonical oneirism, talking about oneiric poetry as "*active* poetry" and giving the following explanation: "The real universe is its target, the transformation into series that are ever more removed from *appearances*, but ever closer to that area in which – of course – truth is throbbing alive: that is the core of its creation. The sheer contours of the objects do not disappear, but become connected, highlighting almost self-standing borderlines between them."<sup>17</sup> It is interesting that appearances (images simulated in oneiric manner or built after oneiric patterns) dissipate gradually, as they are building a real core that depends on the connections and interconnections which are giving birth to a new poetry, restructured in an oneiric sense, minutely redesigned. Aiming to be clearer, Dimov comes up with something truly new in Romanian poetry, namely with the idea of autocreation. The oneiric poem creates itself gradually, step by step.

It depends on its own rolling avalanche, on its own functioning and progress. Here is the quotation and the explanation, which I find to be really foundational for the definition of oneiric poetry: “The fringes, the seams, the ornaments of the real universe, with its memory and concentric ideals, are essential in oneiric poetry since they allow things to exercise their only non-tragic, non-depressive activity: autocreation, automorphism, intercommunication and, not least, Panism, connectivity, the *oneiric vortex*”.<sup>18</sup> What is the relevance of this ample quote? The oneiric vortex refers precisely to the autocreation of a poem, in the sense defined by Dimov; a poem built through an oneiric vortex is not a poem that contains a dream or dreams, but one that conveys a dreamlike feeling through a hyperbolically unfolding avalanche.

What matters, therefore, is the avalanche of images which is the very engine (turbine, vortex) of the poem that builds itself, that creates itself. At the end of the article “Preambul”, Leonid Dimov adds another key issue: “*it’s not about recounting dreams, but about applying their laws with utmost lucidity*”.<sup>19</sup> The law of dreams is, therefore, the central law of creation for an oneiric poem. The poet is a maker of laws for dreams in the poem; the poet is, however, not only a legislator, but also the lyrical promoter of these laws, which rely on images and a cohesive narrative. The poet does not tell dreams (in spite of the inner narrative of the poem that exists and functions as such), but rebuilds them lucidly, re-births them, allowing them, at the same time the freedom of autocreation, almost independently of the author.

Other relevant ideas can be found in the article “Pledoarie pentru o artă

optimistă” (“Plea for an optimist art”, published in *Gazeta literară*, no. 30, 25 July 1968). In this text, Dimov again makes reference to the oneiric vortex (which he no longer calls as such and no longer attempts to quantify). The article explains the mechanism of hybridizing different and even opposite segments (in principle) which are at work in an oneiric poem: this is (or becomes) a mixture of contradictory things, which gradually reach a unifying platform, spectacular in its diversity. “The world of objects that oneiric art involves discards the antagonistic elements that divide phenomena, transmutes values, i.e., it considers that the *objects* of art are both the center and the slums, both gardens with hawthorns and the terraces of the great *second-empire* palaces, it grants equal attention to both social realistic frescoes and fairy tales”.<sup>20</sup> We may detect here a hybrid poetics or a hybrid poetry that the author defines as a sort of realistic-oneiric tapestry. This is, actually, a specific paradox of Dimov’s style: perceiving the world through mixed lenses, through the merging of opposites. The reality will not be reproduced as reality, but as reality reconstructed according to the laws of dreams, of lucid dreams, as a painstakingly accomplished artifact. The poet is first of all a legislator and then a creator, one who fills with matter the skeleton he has built.

Leonid Dimov is captivated or even fascinated by a poem with a borderline structure, which violates both the boundaries of reality and those of conventional dreams. What the author is looking for is a structure of transition and interference between two opposite things and worlds. Then, another key-idea: the oneiric poem is not escapist, but one invasive,

encompassing everything (structurally, imagistically, linguistically and objectually). It even has the ambition to acquire cosmic dimensions, because “Oneiric ‘reification’ does not mean the ossification of beings into objects, but only their ‘objectification’, in the sense of erasing relational, customary, rigid borders, rendered conventional by an apparent reality, in order to create a *Panic*, self-sufficient world. This world excludes nothing, but includes everything, does not escape, but invades”.<sup>21</sup>

Leonid Dimov the theorist discusses these issues amply and contrapuntally in an unusual manuscript, published in the anthology *Momentul oniric (The Oneiric Moment)*, with the emblematic title “În odaia minotaurului. Încercare asupra artei onirice” (“In the chamber of the minotaur. An attempt at oneiric art”). A dream, says the poet in this text, is a strange fragment of the world, but it partakes of the world, it exists inside it, not outside. The oneirism which contains the dream is a broader matrix than the usual, as it accommodates opposite areas and dimensions. What the poet borrows from dreams are methods, procedures, strategies, tactics. Dimov’s statements are intentionally terse and academic: “Because the *object of oneiric literature* is not the dream or, better said, is not exclusively the dream, but the *whole* reality of which that dream is a significant and – well – strange part. What oneiric literature borrows (the term is not inappropriate because, here, the borrowed elements are spontaneously returned) from the arsenal of dreams is their methodology”.<sup>22</sup> After retrieval and ingestion, the method of dreams is regurgitated and returned where it was taken from; what has been extracted is just a mechanism.

Leonid Dimov explains technically what changes occur in oneiric syntax, spelling and prosody. But then, through his extensive explanations, the poet returns to an idea he holds dear, namely that of the creative world and of poetry (in fact) which, from a certain point, after it has learned the mechanism of production and after it has raced its engines, knows how to create itself, to energize itself, to work by itself, without the author even: “Gaining such concreteness, such translucency, the real world, the world by and through which we move with such ease in the mornings of our daily life, rises to the rank of auto-world, that is, of self-contained landscape, sanctioned by a demiurge with an eternal penchant for benevolence: the oneiric artist”.<sup>23</sup> However, this creator and artist is not so full of bonhomie as Dimov would want us to believe, because at the end of the initiation process and of the quest-like undertaking lies the typical space of the minotaur, even though this monster is a converted one. The goal is not to get out of the maze, but to cross it, with all its abysmal challenges; but the depth metamorphoses the monster and also the one who traverses the maze. At the end, in the chamber of the minotaur, the neophyte (the poet) is ingurgitated and becomes himself the minotaur who will devour Ariadne, that is, reason.<sup>24</sup>

The oneiric creator is, so to say, monstrous, because he devours reality and reason. Leonid Dimov is aware that he defines, in principle, something against nature, but it is precisely this unique and atypical blend that appears to be stimulating in an oneiric sense. The poet is an alchemist, albeit unwittingly; it is something that he merely intuitively. He sees himself mostly as a legislator: “What the oneiric writer works

with are not the elements of reality (they are the same as elements in the dream), but the laws which govern them".<sup>25</sup> The laws of the dream are the ones that exclude the muse, trance or automatic dictation, substituting them with the lucidity of the new creator. Although Leonid Dimov seems determined to destroy the romantic or surrealist matrix, through trenchant, even brutal assertions, he seeks to transgress the real through dreams in order to produce misalliances. The explanation that follows is almost like a theoretical video: "Oneiric literary creation, just like the pictorial one, is not imitation, the filming of a dream (that would be naturalism *à rebours*), but on the contrary, the investigation of real images with that reactive force that is specific to dreams, in order to use them as tools of investigation until the moment when, according to the legislation laid down by the author, they are relocated in a syntagmatic group meant to generate a real dream state in the reader".<sup>26</sup>

The oneiric poet is, thus, a methodical legislator, a technician, but his technique is designed to trigger a dreamlike state in the receiver. This dream state with which the reader is impregnated can contaminate the creator as well, for oneiric poetry of could be "drug" not just for the reader, but also for the demiurge. This role of a drug, as Dimov skillfully defines it, has a twofold defiant relevance for the theory of oneirism, because the demiurge is, thus, doubly endowed with both qualities of perceiving the real and with nocturnal and hypnagogic abilities: "/.../ by making available to the creator tools that reality without dreams cannot provide, oneiric art can play a gnostic role".<sup>27</sup> Is the oneiric poet or could he be, therefore, a creator of

the gnostic type? Be it just metaphorically speaking, such a new aptitude renders the oneiric poet as a fake schizoid self, who has tried to exclude pathological manifestations and to reach a consensus on the issue of reality and dreams. However, is this what happened with the poetry of Leonid Dimov? Or was the theory put into practice only partially?

### Dimov, the Neo-Gothic

What I mean by neo-Gothic is a certain nightmarish atmosphere of Dimov's poems (however, a different nightmarish quality than for the romantics, who were closer to Gothic romances, albeit also partly different from them – it is simply a Dimovian, personal, inimitable neo-Gothic). The limit or the border between light and nightmare often fluctuates.

Dimov's extensive and narrative poems, with a cinematic quality, speak of a whole array of mysteries and initiations into the para-world. These initiations are undertaken in a lucid manner, through a neo-Gothic that is at least relatively assumed and which resorts to a kind of postmodern baroque linguistic means. A quest is at stake, for Dimov is anxiously playful, a quasi-neurotic "imaginative *artifex*"; his sense of the carnivalesque is never without purpose, but is based on anxieties and deep fears related to death, love, knowledge and creation. There are, in other words, two Leonid Dimovs: one is a postmodern baroque artist, an inexhaustible ludic creator and an inventor of poetic language in the light of day, while the other is tortured by nightmares (not necessarily nocturnal), with anxiety and concerns which reach very deep and are troubling. What is attested in

this case is the very alliance between reality and unreality that the poet theorizes in his programmatic texts; the result is the coincidence of opposites, a common reference in the conceptual articulations of the poet. I will analyze only the neo-Gothic sequences in the author's poems, since they are the ones that seem truly challenging, but also because the neo-Gothic dimension of his poetry has been less (or almost not at all) discussed by critics, as opposed to his much-debated postmodern-baroque and ludic propensities.

Corin Braga has detected "neo-Gothic tales"<sup>28</sup> in Dimov's poems. The neo-Gothic patina of certain poems written by Dimov (especially the ample narrative ones) relies on the process of alchemic enhancement that gathers together eerie and nightmarish elements, in texts that could be called *dark fairy tales*. Dimov's neo-Gothic affinities are probably generated by the Gnostic demiurgic drives the author spoke about, in isolated manner, true, in his theoretical texts. I define this tendency of Dimov's as neo-Gothic because his poems, however laden with somber and obscure elements, will never be exclusively Gothic, but always flanked by playful irony and sarcasm. Dimov's neo-Gothic perspective is tenuous, not concentrated; it is a neo-Gothic diluted by melancholy and irony; it never becomes stifling. I should mention here Dan Grădinaru's opinion, who sees certain sections of the author's poetry as produced by a quasi-shaman who passes them off as healing recipes, such as: flight (and levitation), submersion in the carnivalesque crowd, compensatory eroticism, Gnosis through a magic filter<sup>29</sup>.

I shall now briefly present an inventory of various themes and thematic elements

used by Leonid Dimov in his poetry to suggest or even define the neo-Gothic setting. In so far as air is concerned, his poems often feature (and these words appear as such) mists, winds, fogs, icy breezes, dusty gusts, damp, stour, soot, fly ash, smut, jelly, vapors, sludges, swamps, molds. Visually, the characters that appear in the poems I am referring to have a spectral ghostly consistency: phantasmatic apparitions, livid or bluish entities, hallucinations, dying men, feeble individuals, shadows and tarry contours, deceased (animals and humans), lunatics, ancestors (with translucent bones) skulls (ornamental or not, with the role of a medium), vesperal presences, visions, skeletons, beheaded and self-beheaded men, hags, croakers, demons, witches, vipers, homunculi, lemurs, monsters, beasts (mythological or from folklore – werewolves, asps, unicorns, griffins, basilisks, *iele*, etc.). The settings are marked, in turn, by neo-Gothic features: stretches of coal, lunar perspectives, dark or blackened topoi, medieval ruins, cemeteries, overgrown ivy, weird laboratories, cantons, precipices, tunnels, deserted citadels, meandering roads, basilicas, haunted inns, towers, crossroads, temples in ruins, tombs, portals, potholes, "twisted woods", obscure gardens, bloody edifices, canals. The plots of these poems with a neo-Gothic tinge are always linked to trauma, injury, pre-death or posthumous stasis, murders, agonies, macabre or absurd gestures (in a traumatic sense). At an auditory level, Dimov's poems are marked by whispers, mutters, swear words, alienated and alienating noises, eerie sounds, odd silences.

I shall analyze, in what follows, some of the more profound neo-Gothic fragments in Dimov's poetry, in the

chronological order in which the poems were published. Let me start with a few sequences from the poem “Istoria lui Claus și a giganticei spălătorese” (“The History of Claus and the Giant Washerwoman”, from the volume *7 poeme, [7 Poems]*, published in 1968), because this was the most publicized text of the author, but also because the neo-Gothic elements here deserve an in-depth discussion. Ion Bogdan Lefter identifies in this poem a portrait of the character Claus in the style of Urmuz (a character made up of somewhat avant-garde pieces) and a castrating portrait (in a Freudian sense) of the washerwoman, involved in an atypical and problematic love story, similar to that of *Luceafărul* by Mihai Eminescu or parodic towards it.<sup>30</sup> I should also mention, however, something else: both characters are monstrous (in spite of their problematic love); they are non-human rather than human or, at least, they have a dual existence, like *Janus bifrons*. The ultimate monster is, however, the washerwoman, and laundry is just her daily job that camouflages her essential monstrosity. This is one of the poems in which, under the appearance of playfulness and spectacular narrative fantasy is concealed, in fact, a homunculoïd association, a non-human laboratory. The washerwoman, the housemaid, the woman whose action seems trivial (or so it should be; it could also be a parodic tribute paid, why not, to the poem “La beauté” by Charles Baudelaire) has the features of an ogress from Romanian fairy tales, but she is an ogress in a postmodern key; it not just her gigantic stature that is troubling, but also her portrait done almost in the style of Lautréamont: “A shark with the scales brought from the great depths,/ A mut tainted by a Tungus, // Don’t you

see, you are wallowing in turd/ Your rotten tit shattered into live flesh,/ Your eyes are toothless, your goop is notched/ By slobby worms rolling on your back/ And your rusty wax belly / Foul blind beasts barking in the wilderness”.<sup>31</sup> In the erotic relation between Claus and the washerwoman, it is the latter who dominates; at the level of ideas, however, Claus is the dominant pole. On the other hand, Dimov constantly emphasizes the physical antithesis (horrible sometimes, funny at other times) between the two infatuated characters (about that, Claus confesses, at one point, that it also works as an association for the elimination of other monsters!): Claus looks like a retarded child, while the giant woman evinces maternal-pregnancy drives in her relationship with the self-infantilized man. When the man-child vexes her, the monstrosity of the washerwoman is manifest, in daylight, without any camouflage, the suggestion being that she is a giant succubus or even a cyclopic entity.

Dimov’s neo-Gothic world is often populated with “batty demons”: these demons are not gothic in the traditional, canonical sense, but often seem to be oddballs, stunned, confused, and sometimes even dumb or retarded. It is noteworthy that, even in the most brisk poems of Leonid Dimov there occurs, at some point, a murder or a maiming, a rape or an injury (be they even absurd), which set the reader thinking: there is always a violent act, but one that is usually sublimated with the help of a cheerful fantasy. In the volume *Carte de vise (The Book of Dreams, 1969)* there always happens something traumatic, and the upward or downward trajectory becomes melancholy or, more radically, it becomes infernal. The poems almost

always describe a derailment and a deviation from reality; in the underground, a melancholy bordering on neurosis pervades these poems, with a semi-visible thread. But, as we have already said, the monsters in Dimov's poems are never terrifying or hideous in the traditional sense; they are, rather, semi-monsters that cannot survive in the day-to-day reality due to their diurnal shields that they manipulate to deceive the others. Still, their demiurge cannot be fooled and Dimov knows that his characters are monstrous (adapted, indeed, to a postmodern baroque; hence, their neo-Gothic quality), that they are the source of a certain concealed anxiety, protected by the armor of quotidian existence.

What is dilemmatic in the author's fancifully bulimic poetry is its lugubrious stance (never exacerbated), marked by an underground, funeral or infernal, but diffuse atmosphere. Melancholy and neurosis are constantly present, even if they only flickeringly erupt from their hidden niche. Many poems are marked, topographically speaking, by labyrinthine geographies comprising underground passageways, basements, tunnels – haunted or haunting spaces that make up a mini-map of Dimov's subdued neo-Gothic vein. They are not detailed, but merely mentioned. They are, however, placed under the umbrella of obscurity (mists, dark fogs) which is characteristic of a downward topography (not only in a strictly spatial sense, but especially in psychic terms). At the end of many otherwise joyful or dilemmatic poems (with absurd insights) there appears the idea that the characters have an uncertain status, and it impossible to know whether they are living or dead (or the other way around, dead or alive). There is a prevailing

spectrality in the poems of Leonid Dimov; the unclear status of many of the characters (which appear to be awaiting death or to have recently died) is contagious and makes the poems themselves be haunted (in a neo-Gothic sense).

In spite of ironically approaching monstrosity and deliberately adopting the mechanisms of parody, the poem "Vârcolacul și Clotilda" ("The Werewolf and Clotilda", from the volume *Carte de vise*), portrays the werewolf as postmodern (he is a contortionist, but with the skeleton of a dragon or a vampire) and preserves gothic elements, adapted through the lens of native folklore. The neo-Gothic werewolf (because it is postmodern, as I stated above) is in love with tennis player Clotilda, but his strange love for a mortal trivializes him only ephemerally (as a human and as a man). Ion Bogdan Lefter decrypts in this poem a story related to Eminescu's *Luceafărul* (*The Evening Star*, like in the poem "Istoria lui Claus și a giganticei spălătorese"), given the association and the radical otherness of the partners in the couple.<sup>32</sup> Still, beyond this recognizable paradigm (which also alludes, by the way, to Ion Barbu's poem "Riga Crypto și Iapona Enigel", "King Crypto and the Laplander Enigel"), the poem trenchantly addresses the monstrosity of the werewolf, described as such, despite its apparent tameness due to his infatuation. The character "Has buckles and rings along his body / three parallel ridges/ and huge, oval eyes, dazed by reveries,/ like two bloody moons".<sup>33</sup> Obviously, these features are meant to portray him succinctly, but especially to notice the conflict between his non-human and his human emotional features, since he falls in love with a mortal (sportswoman). The

three dragon spine ridges validate his status as a beast, as do his red, gigantic eyes (like those of vampires). At the end, having been partially accepted by Clotilda, the werewolf reveals a blue, glassy (but happy) limb, a paw-hand-arm, nestled in the palm of Clotilda, without it being clear whether a love ritual will actually take place between the two (or not).

The poem “Lili și densitatea” (“Lili and density”, from *Carte de vise*) is strange, because it morphs a bird, a hawk, into an unusual monster, depicted in slow motion through its actions or, rather, its movements in the air. This hawk seduces Lili (pictured in the midst of aphrodisiac rituals of self-excitation and exhibiting the voluptuousness of a contortionist) and even impregnates her like a flying vampire-like creature. This act of impregnation looks like, in fact, a disembowelment (sado-masochistic torture), and the hawk has the allure of an incubus. The terrifying element is somewhat toned down in this poem, even if the erotic ceremony remains, in a way, horrendous.

A parenthesis is necessary here. The monstrous couples in Dimov’s narrative poems have influenced another oneiric writer who, three years later after *Carte de vise* (1968), published a remarkable neo-Gothic fairy-tale in verse. I am referring to Vintilă Ivănceanu and his illustrated book *Vulcaloborgul și frumoasa Beleponjă* (*The Vulcaloborg and the Beautiful Beleponjă*).<sup>34</sup> The author invents eleven spectacular hybrid monsters, with indeterminate identity (Vulcaloborgul, Pocovățul, Lilibrada, Centaushohaim, Piul, Helsingformul, Eventricula, Retemortul, Ciucul, Gudrunofagul, Strâmboseporul – their names are untranslatable!) who will battle

and destroy one another, to conquer the female monster called Beleponja (a Medusan woman, with four breasts and three gazelle legs, carrying two gendarmes in her chest cage).

As I stated previously, different agonistic elements occur somewhat constantly in Dimov’s poems: mutilation, injury, evisceration, recently deceased persons, etc. All of these elements (no matter how minimal) pinpoint an obsession with destruction and even self-destruction, a destruction not only of what is human, but also of animals, objects, or microcosmic entities. In the poem “Realitate” (“Reality”, from *Carte de vise*) the initiation takes place in some abstruse, ineffable Mysteries, where, along their neophyte route, the characters are pursued by an unnamable feline. The poem becomes a thriller due to the persecuting beast, and the characters avoid being bitten and killed at the last minute, thanks to the opening of a gate that looks more like a hatch. Subsequently, the landscape turns black, everything converts into a tormenting register, every space will be inhabited by the nameless, monstrous beast, which has multiplied now and is functional (as an image) in each and every room. The beast is some kind of vampire or dragon that smiles as it kills you. Actually the purpose of this entity appears to be the terrifying pursuit of the victims and not necessarily their elimination. All is but a confusing, nocturnal vision, a haunting. The obscure animal will be actually removed through the fortunate mating and the exorcism committed by the followed pair.

A consistent neo-Gothic vision (limited, however, to concentrated sections) only appears in the vast, narrative poems, or in cycles of short poems, which are related

thematically. Many poems chart not just the breached border between reality and unreality, but also that between the living and the dead. Leonid Dimov is fascinated by spectrality, by dead-alive or alive-dead hybrids, which are not even aware what they are and in what stasis of life or death (pre-death) they are trapped.

The volume *Eleusis* (1970) contains the overt idea of initiation into the Mysteries: the mediator is, sometimes, a “great-grandfather”, but can be anyone else (including animals, lost souls, deceased anonyms). In *Eleusis*, the neo-Gothic is introverted; the underground space contains a panoply of theatrical scenes that might also unfold at the surface. The underground scenes are housed in the skull of the poet-narrator, giving the impression of a partly assumed neo-Gothic. What dominates in these theatrical scenes is the confusion, the interchangeability and the spatial and temporal reciprocity between life and death. Spectrality is consistent and coveted, as it is the key point of the rarefied neo-Gothic atmosphere. Sometimes, an individual who is initially normal transforms himself, because of trauma (injury), into an entity that is indecipherable. This is what happens with the passer-by who trips and falls, then suddenly becomes a repugnant man whom even the sisters of charity find repugnant. The metamorphosis is astounding and terrifying just in the first part. Towards the end, the character’s portrait is tamed down (the author’s irony and self-irony are noticeable in the subtext): “I had three frightening spikes / Right on top of my bald head,/ Smoke came out of my nostrils as if from Vesuvius,/ My elephant ears flapping around- / And I was growing relentlessly, naked now, and gigantic/ A

huge eye had burst underneath my eyelid/ And a sort of water was oozing from it / Fragrant and transparent”.<sup>35</sup> The transformation is unwanted, the metamorphosed man being shocked and terrified by it. Sometimes, such nonhuman or parahuman transformations are accompanied by ups, downs, stumblings and collapses. Something changes, by contagion, the topography itself.

The neo-Gothic in Leonid Dimov’s poems is marked by anguish, not built on fear. Anxiety, with undertones of fear, is insidious or invasive when at stake is explicitly a lucid initiation into death. In the volume *Eleusis* there are plenty of scenes in which neophytes are unaware that they are crossing the inferno and that they will attend various funeral (or macabre) rites. The guards of such territories are grotesque entities that have changed the underground world into a domestic universe; the bleak spaces (openings, corridors, gates, canals, niches) are vividly described. This is a funeral area (in spite of its endearing or funny peculiarity, in places), a territory of anguish and of futile attempts at exorcism. We are dealing, actually, with a stage of psychic *besmirching*. Whether that hue is one of pre-death or post-death, the area is contagious, and the resurrection of the characters is rare or is obstructed and prohibited.

Dimov’s last book, *Veșnica reintoarcere* (*The Eternal Return*, 1982), re-imposes spectrality as a major theme in the long narrative poems, even though the style is often burlesque. In the first poem of the volume, “Dilema” (“The Dilemma”), anguished haunting is reinstated as a theme, the neo-Gothic remaining, however, limited to rare, concentrated sections. The poem “Dilema” recounts, in Dimov’s inimitable

style, the premonition of a man (who will die), narrativizing a state of pre-spectrality. The character anxiously spells out his future extinction. Spectrality has not installed yet, but it is foreseen, intuited and envisioned. The lyrics speak of its ineffable advent in the near future. The poem “Schiorul” (“The Skier”, one of the masterpieces of this volume) has a remarkable neo-Gothic quality, spectrality being reinstated openly: the character of the skier is really a specter from the depths that haunts the life of the narrator, from adolescence to old age. The skier is an archetypal psychopomp entity; he not only induces anxiety, but is genuinely scary (psychologically, not physically, like the monsters from other stages in Dimov’s poetry). He validates himself as a symbolic ferryman of the mountains and the snow for those who spot him ritualistically. All the poems in this final volume contain an initiation (quasi-Eleusinian). They are ample narrative poems, with a dark or terrifying story, demonstratively related to life-death and to scouring life in a carousel, preparing the descent into the underworld – whether this be an ironic, self-ironic or burlesque descent. All these poems are about a crossing, a transportation, a

displacement from an area of the living into one of specters, of infernal ferrymen (but ataraxic or full of bonhomie). The specter of the storyteller is almost always invisible, it traverses those spaces and areas without being detected by anyone other than those who are already spectral. The act of *anagnorisis* (in a strict, Greek sense, of recognition) takes place only among the dead, and not necessarily among the living; the incompatibility between the two kinds of life (life itself, and life after death) is overt, and that is why, sometimes, forming a bridge between these otherwise irreconcilable territories, the poems feature medium-like characters, intercessors (who are dying, usually, quasi-shamanic animals, or camouflaged visionaries, etc.).

The neo-Gothic of the first and second stages of Leonid Dimov’s poetry became, in the third stage of his lyrical works, a form of para-Gothic (if we may coin this term). Still, regardless which Gothic or quasi-Gothic feature or set of features we are talking about, Dimov’s poems fully deserve to be rediscovered (both by Romanian and by foreign readers) and acknowledged as belonging to the line of force of twentieth-century Romanian poetry.

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## NOTES

1. *Leonid Dimov. Opera poetică*, vol. I (edited and foreword by Ion Bogdan Lefter, Paralela 45, 2010), vol. II (edited and foreword by Ion Bogdan Lefter, Paralela 45, 2010) and vol. III (edited and foreword by Ion Bogdan Lefter, Paralela 45, 2012).
2. *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 13.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 18.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 19.
5. Luminița Corneanu, *Leonid Dimov. Un oniric în Turnul Babel*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 2014, p. 104.
6. *Ibidem*, pp. 112, 113, 114.
7. *Ibidem*, pp. 115-119.
8. Corin Braga, "Leonid Dimov. Identitatea scindată", in *Psibobiografii*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011, p. 96.
9. *Ibidem*.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 99.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 100.
12. *Ibidem*.
13. *Ibidem*, pp. 144-145.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 157.
15. *Momentul oniric*, anthology edited by Corin Braga, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1997, p. 36.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 37.
17. *Ibidem*.
18. *Ibidem*.
19. *Ibidem*.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 39.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 41.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 256.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 258.
24. *Ibidem*, pp. 258-259.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 259.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 260.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 260.
28. Corin Braga, *Op. cit.*, p. 96.
29. Dan Grădinaru – *Dimov*, București, Editura Nord Sud, 2014, pp. 283-284.
30. *Dimov, Opera poetică*, vol. I, pp. 33-35.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 124.
32. *Ibidem*, vol. II, p. 17.
33. *Ibidem*, p. 68.
34. Vintilă Ivănceanu, *Vulcaloborgul și frumoasa Beleponjă*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1971.
35. *Dimov, Opera poetică*, vol. II, pp. 185-186.