

MĂIASTRA:

A History of Romanian Sculpture in Twenty-Four Parts

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PART VIII: EREBUS AND NYX

If there was a man named Constantin Bălănescu, I never knew him. If this man occupied a not insignificant role in the diplomatic services of the Romania People's Republic and went by the diminutive "Costel," he and I never met. To me, to his family, and to his friends, the youngest of my wife's four uncles was only ever called "Bivo."

The name came from "bivol," Romanian for "buffalo," which was a particular obsession of Costel's after returning from an extended trip to the United States. "They put them on the money!" he'd exclaim, and tromp across the floor on all fours to the delight of my wife and her young cousins. To them, he was only ever "Unchi Bivo," which delighted his older siblings and—I believe—delighted him too.

At times, Bivo could be a bit eccentric; at others, damn near prophetic. But Jesus, was he funny. I remember, it was only our second time hosting my wife's extended family as a newly married couple and she and I were frantic. Bivo arrived over an hour early and, it must be said, behaved exquisitely. He brought illicit French cigarettes and wine, regaled us with tales of his travels and complimented us on what a fine home we had made (at the time a minority opinion in the family). As I cooked, he told me, nearly out of earshot of my wife, a story about an encounter he'd had with a "healthy" older lady at the post office that makes me sick with laughter to this day.

When the doorbell rang and the guests arrived, we lost track of Bivo. My wife's paternal grandmother was what you'd call a "hard case," and had to be specially catered to for fear she would cast an odor over the night's festivities. We had nearly made it through the first course without incident when my wife gasped,

and the blood ran out of my new grandmother's face.

I was the last one around the table to look. There was Bivo, standing in the hallway, his head buried in an old newspaper, his pants around his ankles and his shirt lifted up over his belly. "Hm—Lucian Blaga is dead," he said flatly, and when he saw the entire family staring back at him, now convulsing with laughter, Bivo smiled, gave us a soldier's salute, newspaper balled up in hand, and adjourned to the restroom. That night, after our guests had gone, my wife told me that I must have imagined it, that Bivo had always played pranks on the family, but I know at that moment, I saw a flicker of confusion in his eyes.

Years later and there was no mistaking it: Bivo's mind had deteriorated. He spent his last years in hospice care in a small town in the southern Carpathians. During the days, he was lucid, but when the sun set in the evenings, his mind would become troubled. After he died, the family filled his memory with the Bivo who roamed the Great Plains of the living room floor, who scandalized his adoring family. But, for me, what remained of him was the look in his eyes as the sun went down.

To the Greeks, darkness and night were not synonyms, they were lovers. Erebus and Nyx, darkness and night, were born of Chaos, and together gave birth to Aether and Hemera, brightness and the day, respectively. A beautiful thought. In the realm of the devolution of mental acuity, however, this family represents a sort of transition: out of confusion (chaos) comes the recognition and acknowledgment of confusion, despite the inability to see through it (darkness). This is followed by an understanding of the confusion's significance and the subsequent submission to its reality (night). In theory, this understanding leads to euphoria (brightness) and, ultimately, peace (the day). I have seen the bleakest moments of this transition, first in the eyes of my uncle in that Carpathian sanatorium, and later, frozen in marble,



Statue of Traian Demetrescu by Filip Marin, Cişmigiu Park, Bucharest

HE FELT THE TIME REQUIRED TO TRAVEL TO THOSE FOREIGN WORLDS SLIPPING THROUGH HIS FINGERS, AND HIS LAST MOMENTS SEEMED LIKE A STRING OF NEGOTIATIONS AGAINST THE DARK.

in the eyes of Filip Marin's memorial bust of the poet Traian Demetrescu in Cișmigiu Gardens in Bucharest.

"Tradem," as Demetrescu was known, played a memorable role in the literary scene of late 19th century Romania. A prolific poet and socialist activist, Tradem fought tuberculosis nearly his entire adult life, and more than beauty or politics, his poetry bears the mark of a prolonged awareness of the nearness of death. Like uncle Bivo, Tradem dreamt of distant lands, and the ether of those dreams swirled behind his eyes like red desert sand. He felt the time required to travel to those foreign worlds slipping through his fingers, and his last moments seemed like a string of negotiations against the dark. When he died at the young age of twenty-nine, Tradem was mourned by his peers, who fought hard for his immortalization, with busts commissioned in Craiova and in Bucharest. The man charged with one of these tributes, sculptor Filip Marin, was not, however, so beloved.

Arghezi detested him. "...Marin, who, beyond his goatee and hair, knotted tie and hat, is utterly talentless."¹ Petru Vintilă was only slightly kinder when he wrote, "Sculptor Filip Marin would have been forgotten even by the most detailed history of the Romanian art had he not made the mortuary mask of the Evening Star"² [Note: the Evening Star is the nickname of Mihai Eminescu, who was called "Luceafarul" after his epic love poem of the same name. "But his big wonderful eyes' gleam/ Chimeric and deep/ Shows two unsatiated spasms/ That but into dark peep."³]

Marin's contemporaries resented his fortune in capturing in plaster the final moments of Romania's greatest artist, Eminescu. To make matters worse, he was later chosen to sculpt the central figure of the sculptural ensemble commissioned for Carol Park in 1906 [Note: see Part I.], alongside the two most talented Romanian sculptors not named Brancusi, Storck, and Paciurea, [Note: see Parts VI and III, respectively.] both of whom had taught Marin at

university. Despite his success, Marin's work was never considered in the realm of his professors, and he was written off as another Storck pupil whose work offended no one and was, therefore, perfect for interbelic Romania.

In Marin's defense, subtlety and respect for form were about as valued in those days as they are today. To the art elite of 1920's Bucharest, Marin may not have merited the commissions he was awarded, but it makes no difference now, and when it comes to his Demetrescu, I'm glad for the fact.

If Marin captured Eminescu's expression in the moments immediately following his death, it was Tradem's preceding countenance that was Marin's intention for his bust of the poet. To ease his suffering, Marin sculpted Tradem a sort of salve—a country girl laying flowers at the young man's breast. Rendered in full, she is overflowing with life, a drop of golden color to fill his colorless cheeks. [Note: Marin's stellar monument to the engineer Gheorghe Duca, made alongside Paciurea, has a similar young girl built into the pedestal.]

Certainly there are greater monuments in Romania, ones grander in scale and more expertly crafted, even here in Cișmigiu Gardens (Ion Jalea's Monumentul Eroilor Francezi, for one), and certainly made by artists more revered than Marin. But fortunately, art has grown out of its grade school days, and contests for "biggest" and "best" have been left to those boors disrespectful of the sanctity of the uninformed, inexplicable, and valueless sensation of the experience of art. I myself feel nothing so powerful as the compassion present in Marin's rendering of brave Tradem, echoed by the kindness of the country girl, the monument's placement among the shady trees of this sublime city garden, and the dignity available to those of us who, at the last, steel ourselves against the darkness, and the night. ■

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1 Tudor Arghezi, "Soara," 1914, pub. *Tablete de cronicar*, ESPLA, 1960, pp.279-281

2 Petru Vintilă, *Milita*, (Heliopolis Editura, 1971), 24.

3 Mihai Eminescu, "Lucafarul," 1883.

Ad, maybe