



Ștefan Bolea

Once Upon Atrocity. Gothic Music Influences in the First Romanian (Neo)gothic Novel

ABSTRACT

In the following study we explore the Gothic Metal musical influences on Oliviu Crâznic's novel, *...And Then The Nightmare Came At Last* (2010), a book which can be regarded as the first (Neo)gothic novel originally written in Romanian. Moreover, we identify three themes belonging to the novel, extracted from Gothic music. All the themes (the alliance between love and death, the conflict between good and evil and the contrast between beauty and the aesthetics of the ugly) have been identified also in Symbolist and Romantic poetry (in the works of Charles Baudelaire and Mihai Eminescu) and in marginal existential philosophy (e.g. E.M. Cioran).

KEYWORDS

Gothic Literature; Gothic Metal Music; Romanticism; Symbolism; Nihilism; Horror Movies Existentialism; Anxiety; Death; Gnosticism.

ȘTEFAN BOLEA

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca,
Romania
stefan.bolea@gmail.com

Oliviu Crâznic's gothic novel (*...And Then The Nightmare Came At Last*, 2010) is a highly significant one, especially in a literature that didn't seem to produce recognizable horror stories in all its history¹. Imagine that Crâznic's novel had been written in the late 19th century, by a contemporary of Romanian literary icons, such as Mihai Eminescu or Alexandru Macedonski. Romanian literature would then have taken a very different route, one that would have probably led to earlier to (post)modernity. An archetypal genre, horror is not at all frivolous. Suffice it to think of Frankenstein or Dr. Jekyll, of Nosferatu or of Faustus, to realize that. These characters provide an alliance between subjectivity and darkness, between individualism and super-humanity. Perhaps they can be explained through a Satanic complex (see for instance the second analysed theme here) also, which stated that *one can transcend the transcendent*, that *one is higher than Highest*. I imagine that Crâznic's *Nightmare* could have been written in the 1880's because there is something essentially romantic about it. Let us not forget however that it is the skill of the author to make the novel appear pre-modern, un-Romanian (Western), written perhaps by Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe or Baudelaire. Crâznic has worked a lot to produce a like effect, and create the appearance of authenticity.



In light of the above, I would like to compare *The Nightmare* with the Marquis de Sade's work in the first place. In the same category I include as influences the film adaptations *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) directed by Roger Corman and *Salo* (1975) directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. This is only a formal analogy, which I refer to as the *Theater of Horrors*, one which Crâznic could not avoid because of his imposed setting: the Castle of the Last Towers. The Romanian author doesn't follow Sade in his nihilism: his characters are not "beyond good and evil" and they do not worship the magnificence, cruelty and determinism of Nature. *The Theater of Horrors*, the setting where the soul and the flesh of the characters are attacked, besieged by the absolute Evil, is not only a Romantic construction, having attached to it also a modern nuance.

This is where Corman and Pasolini enter the stage: the Evil is archetypal (perhaps pre-Christian), fundamental, universal but also capable of disguising itself in a contemporary garment. Thus, if Pasolini uses fascists to reconstruct Sade's universe and Corman's Prince Prospero was closer to Nietzsche and Cioran than to Edgar Allan Poe, Crâznic would use Romanticism to shape a very modern story. This is the irony of it: the story is authentic (being very visual and cinematic), seeming to belong foremost to Western literature than to Romanian fiction (if that is even possible) but the ethics and ontology of the characters correspond to the 21st century. Crâznic does not reconstruct Romanticism – he reconstructs modernity through Romanticism.

Here one enters the core of Crâznic's aesthetic philosophy that helped him shape this neogothic novel. Crâznic is deeply influenced by contemporary Gothic Metal music, which enriches his Romantic (with distinct touches of Symbolism and Naturalism) universe. Considering that bands like

Tiamat, Moonspell, Theatre of Tragedy, Cradle of Filth, My Dying Bride, HIM, Lacrimas Profundere, Paradise Lost, Type O' Negative deeply influence the dark philosophy behind Crâznic's *Nightmare*, we should explore in an interdisciplinary fashion the alliance between esoteric truth and poetic vision.

The first theme that becomes visible is the "marriage" (in William Blake's terms) between love and death. This especially Romantic theme, with echoes from Novalis or Wagner (one should think only of *Liebestod*) is explored by the Finnish Gothic Metal band HIM:

I'm in love with you/ And it's crushing my heart/ All I want is you/ To take me into your arms// When love and death embrace// (HIM, *When Love And Death Embrace*².)

We are so young, our lives have just begun/ But already, we are considering escape from this world/ And we've waited for so long for this moment to come/ We're so anxious to be together, together in death ...// Won't you die tonight for love (HIM, *Join Me in Death*³.)

Oh let the world turn its back/ And please let me come closer/ Though the hearts filled with fear/ For this love// Our 666 has got a name/ We burn in its flames again and again/ For it is our/ Dark secret love// (HIM, *Dark Secret Love*⁴.)

The marriage between love and death can take place only when the two forces have something in common, more exactly when love becomes a form of dying, in the words of the Romanian poet Ion Caraion, "love is death's pseudonym"⁵. From a psychological point of view love has revolutionary powers, its sometimes violent



metamorphosis obliterating the former personality. We can thus posit that love destroys the ego, bringing out the subconscious dreamer hidden in the depths. This is not the kind of love HIM had in mind when producing their masterpiece *Join Me*. Lovers want to “die high”, to embrace on the heights and to jump together in the abyss. They desire this particular kind of death because they would like to stay true to the intensity of their emotions, more specifically because of their inherent love of love. This is why love is united with fear and anxiety: the Romeo and Juliet complex is born out of an abhorrence of everyday reality, from a total disgust of what Heidegger called the “they-self” (*das Man*)⁶. From a sociological perspective we have here the reason why Gothic Metal primarily addresses to teenagers: they are more equipped to find this “height and abyss” philosophy addictive.

In Crâznic’s novel this intertwining of love and death is visible in the Platonic love story between the narrating chevalier Arthur de Seragens and the viscountess Adrianna de Valois. Though her character is slightly idealized, her portrait is a “work of love” and affection with Romantic and lyrical traits. (One could infer that Crâznic projects his perennial *anima* archetype in Adrianna’s picture.) “Ice and fire combined in her being bringing fever together with coolness; winter snow sparkled in her eyes, summer showers waved in her hair”⁷. Adrianna’s demise and Arthur’s subsequent survival, his almost autistic isolation and his continuing faithful adoration for her (which is one of the novel’s most recognizable leitmotifs) would turn (and that is HIM’s intuition also) love in something religious. From this perspective one could say that the “death, thou shalt die”⁸ line from the *Sonnet X* by John Donne could be appropriated by a lover, meaning that (in this direction of thought) “even if death dies, love is immortal”.

In literature, a classical presentation of the theme of the marriage of love and death is given in the poem *Mortua est* (1871) by Mihai Eminescu. One could almost say that the death of the loved one brings along the death of the soul or even the obliteration of the self:

To exist! O, what nonsense, what foolish conceit;/ Our eyes but deceive us, our ears but cheat,/ What this age discovers, the next will deny,/ For better just nothing than naught a lie.// I see dreams in men’s clothing that after dreams chase,/ But that tumble in tombs ere the end of the race,/ And I search in my soul how this horror to fly,/ To laugh like a madman? To curse? Or to cry?// 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.//⁹

A second recognizable theme is the battle between good and evil and the Gnostic undercurrent that evil is sometimes more powerful, perhaps even omnipotent. This brings us back to Roger Corman’s *Masque of Red Death* and its postmodern Gothic approach in *And When He Falleth* by Theatre of Tragedy:

Prospero: That cross you wear around your neck; is it only a decoration, or are you a true Christian believer?

Francesca: Yes, I believe – truly.

Prospero: Then I want you to remove it at once! – and never to wear it within this castle again! Do you know how a falcon is trained, my dear? Her eyes are sewn shut. Blinded temporarily she suffers the whims of her God patiently,



until her will is submerged and she learns to serve – as your God taught and blinded you with crosses.

Francesca: You had me take off my cross because it offended ...

Prospero: It offended no-one. No – it simply appears to me to be discourteous to ... to wear the symbol of a deity long dead. My ancestors tried to find it. And to open the door that separates us from our Creator.

Francesca: But you need no doors to find God. If you believe ...

Prospero: Believe?! If you believe you are ... gullible. Can you look around this world and believe in the goodness of a god who rules it? Famine, Pestilence, War, Disease and Death! They rule this world.

Francesca: There is also love and life and hope.

Prospero: Very little hope I assure you. No. If a god of love and life ever did exist ... he is long since dead. Someone ... something rules in his place.¹⁰

Prince Prospero's disguised monologue contains deep and disturbing philosophical ideas: firstly, one learns that religion is a form of "soulwashing", an arbitrary spiritual training that seeks to infantilize forever the disciple (an idea which has much in common with Richard Dawkins's brand of atheism, originating in Feuerbach and Freud). (The anarchistic credo *non serviam* seems fit for Prospero's line of argument.) Secondly, the Nietzschean death of God and the Gnostic thesis of the Evil Demiurge by E.M. Cioran bring a sort of existential atmosphere communicating that this world is only "throwness", an inferno where contingency, misery and hopelessness meet together. Evil has no icons and cannot be named: "Someone ... something rules in [God's] place."

This is pure gnosticism: the evil god that created this world and shaped human

beings banishes us far away from the otherworldly true God, who is hidden and might have been even assassinated by that unworthy creator. We need to remember here the first page of Cioran's gnostic book:

Man, apart from a few anomalies, does not have a bent for the good; what god would prompt him to it? To perform the tiniest act untainted by evil, he must overcome himself, do violence to himself ... Good is what was or will be; it is what never is ... In the beginning, in that pandemonium which set the world inclining toward life, something unmentionable must have occurred which, even now, pervades our malaises, if not our reasoning. How can we cont presume that existence was fouled at its source, existence and the very elements? ... It is difficult, it is impossible to believe that the good god, the "Father," was implicated in the scandal of creation.¹¹

From this Gnostic and Existential "throwness" one could go to the aforementioned Satanic complex (transcending the transcendence would be the credo of the transgressor), which is very fit to explain some of Crâznic's characters. The psychology of the duke of Chalais can be explained to this Evil Demiurge complex, which stated that one is "higher than Highest" or in simple Romantic terms "God is dead, I am God" ("Away with *such* a god! Rather no god, rather make destiny on one's own, rather be a fool, rather be a god oneself!"¹²):

It is known that [the Duke of Chalais] was married to a sixteen year old, who loved him immensely and to whom he was surprisingly loyal; it is said that he treated her like a great asset, keeping her away from the world under



different pretenses. Now he declared indifferently that she didn't make it to the wedding because of her illness. It's easier to avoid temptation than to resist it, he used to say, and I love her so much that if she cheated on me, I would not bear to torture her before I killed her ... She loves him like a God [declares one character about the duke's wife]. She has his statue on a shrine and kneels before him ... Chalais has a shrine also and the God he worships is Death.¹³

The third and final theme we identify in Crăznic's novel is the Symbolist aesthetic of the ugly. This theme was explored in Gothic metal by the British band Cradle of Filth in the song (and also in the video) *The Cthulhu Dawn* inspired by H.P. Lovecraft's short story. Cradle of Filth's front man, Dani Filth starred also in the horror B-movie *Cradle of Fear* (2001), directed by Alex Chandon, a movie which surprises the aforementioned theme.

Within this kissed disembowel arena/
A broken seal on an ancient curse/
Unleashes beasts from the seismic breach/
With lightning reach and genocidal
thirst.../ Shatter the glass house/
Wherein spirits breathe out/ Halitosis
of the soul/ From a reeking abscess/
Plague of far righteousness/ All fates
hang in the balance/ Mocking crucified
dolls/ An inquisition ours/ When the
Sun goes out our powers/ Will extend
throughout Heaven like Asphodel/ As
they have for countless lustrum/ In
dark Midian accustomed/ To burning
effigies of our enemies well.¹⁴

In the dark lyrics of the Cradle of Filth one finds not only an intense presentation of the third theme but also a synthesis of all the three themes already covered: the *death of*

love (the name of a track by Cradle of Filth), the triumph of *Evil*, the *beauty* of ugliness. Obviously there is a fine symmetry between these gloomy (Freud would say *unheimlich*) themes: the principle of death destroys the principle of love; good is powerless next to evil; ugliness shines brighter than beauty. The dialectic victory of the shadow is not final; it is more like a crucifixion between light and darkness which pierces the human soul: love can bring the death of death; omnipotent evil could be conquered by the systemic anomaly of good and so on. Referring more exactly to the third theme let us look more closely on Crăznic's text to check the description of a ghoul:

Bruno laid on his back in the grave, red in cheeks and with eyes wide open, but almost beyond recognition. He looked fat and swollen. The skin was stained with signs of death. From his open belly, where he kept his hands, his bowels mixed with worms and roaches suppurated. His mouth moved with a sick rhythm, filled with earth and pieces of shroud and his eyes were spinning. He didn't look able to make another move and didn't seem alive at all, despite the huge belly and the fresh blood dripping from his mouth.¹⁵

The fragment above explains why the Romanian-French philosopher E.M. Cioran in his first book referred to death as "hideous"¹⁶. The worshippers of the beauty of death (a mark of the first theme) fade away if we capture the physical presence of the dead body, *thanatophilia* being replaced by *thanatophobia*. However, there is a perverse secondary beauty in the terrifying description of the ghoul, which would explain our fascination for horror movies and the fact that anxiety is always ambiguous¹⁷ and somehow attractive. One of the first poets that



discovered the fascination of the dead body and constructed his private version of “The Theater of Horrors”, one that played with *phobos* and *eros* also, was Charles Baudelaire.

And the sky was watching that superb cadaver/
Blossom like a flower./ So frightful was the stench that you believed/
You’d faint away upon the grass.// The blow-flies were buzzing round that putrid belly,/ From which came forth black battalions/ Of maggots, which oozed out like a heavy liquid/
All along those living tatters.// All this was descending and rising like a wave./ Or poured out with a crackling sound;/ One would have said the body, swollen with a vague breath, / Lived by multiplication.¹⁸

This fragment from Baudelaire’s poem *A Carcass* is written – despite the dark description of a dead body filled with maggots – with sheer satisfaction. That reminds us Walter Benjamin’s depiction of Baudelaire’s poetry as possessed by traumatophilia¹⁹: the artist uses his anxieties to go beyond himself and to save himself in a cathartic manner. One might note that the explosion of anxieties takes us to an ontological view of the world. Describing the dead body, exploring nothingness (the carcass being an expression of this very void) we serve by contrast the forces of life, reaching being from the alternative route of non-being.

Oliviu Crâznic’s neo-gothic novel, we note, becomes more eloquent when we look at it with the hermeneutic lenses of Gothic metal music. However, the three themes the reader finds in this novel (the marriage of love and death, the preeminence of evil, the aesthetic of the ugly) have been explored not only in music but also in Romantic and Symbolist poet; moreover, Existential

philosophy and even contemporary horror films have dealt with some of these themes. I have tried to follow the theoretical development of these motifs from Gothic metal music to Crâznic’s neo-gothic prose and beyond it, to poetry and philosophy.

Works Cited

- Charles Baudelaire, *A Carcass*, translated by William Aggeler, <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/126>.
- Ion Caraion, *Dragostea e pseudonimul morții*, Editura Cartea Românească, București, 1980 [in Romanian].
- E.M. Cioran, *The New Gods*, translated by Richard Howard, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974.
- E. M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, translated and with an introduction by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1992.
- Cradle of Filth, *Midian* [Audio CD], Music for Nations, London, 2000.
- Oliviu Crâznic, *...Și la sfârșit a rămas coșmarul*, Editura Vremea, București, 2010. [in Romanian]
- Maria Damon, Ira Livingstone (Eds.), *Poetry And Cultural Studies. A Reader*, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 2009.
- John Donne, *The Poems*, edited by John Nutt, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1999.
- Mihai Eminescu, *Mortua est*, translated by Corneliu M. Popescu, <http://www.est-comp.ro/eminescu/popescu.html>.
- Martin Heidegger, *Being And Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2001.
- HIM, *Greatest Love Songs Vol. 666* [Audio CD], Finnvox, MD and Peacemakers, Helsinki, 1997.
- HIM, *Razorblade Romance* [Audio CD], Rockfield Studios, Wales, 1999.



Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Andreson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1980.

The Masque of Red Death (1964), directed by Roger Corman, screenplay by Charles Beaumont and R. Wright Campbell, from a story by Edgar Allan Poe.

Theatre of Tragedy, *Velvet Darkness They Fear* [Audio CD], Commusication Studio, Germany, 1996.

The Portable Nietzsche, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, Viking Press, New York, 1982.

Notes

¹ One should note that the Transylvanian Dracula belongs to British literature.

² HIM, *When Love And Death Embrace*, On *Greatest Love Songs Vol. 666* [Audio CD], Finnvox, MD and Peacemakers, Helsinki, 1997.

³ HIM, *Join Me in Death*, On *Razorblade Romance* [Audio CD], Rockfield Studios, Wales, 1999.

⁴ HIM, *Dark Secret Love*, On *Greatest Love Songs Vol. 666* [Audio CD], Finnvox, MD and Peacemakers, Helsinki, 1997.

⁵ Ion Caraion, *Dragostea e pseudonimul morții*, Editura Cartea Românească, București, 1980.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being And Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2001, #27, p. 163-168.

⁷ Oliviu Crâznic, *...Și la sfârșit a rămas coșmarul*, Editura Vreamea, București, 2010, p. 156.

⁸ John Donne, *Sonnet X*, in John Donne, *The Poems*, edited by John Nutt, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1999, p. 161.

⁹ Mihai Eminescu, *Mortua est*, translated by

Corneliu M. Popescu, <http://www.estcomp.ro/eminescu/popescu.html> (accessed in 10.02.2014).

¹⁰ *The Masque of Red Death* (1964), directed by Roger Corman, screenplay by Charles Beaumont and R. Wright Campbell, from a story by Edgar Allan Poe. Theatre of Tragedy, *And When He Falleth, On Velvet Darkness They Fear* [Audio CD], Commusication Studio, Germany, 1996.

¹¹ E.M. Cioran, *The New Gods*, translated by Richard Howard, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, p. 3-4.

¹² *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann, Viking Press, New York, 1982, p. 374.

¹³ Oliviu Crâznic, *op.cit.*, p. 33, p. 50.

¹⁴ Cradle of Filth, *The Cthulhu Dawn*, On *Midian* [Audio CD], Music for Nations, London, 2000.

¹⁵ Oliviu Crâznic, *op.cit.*, p. 143.

¹⁶ E. M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, translated and with an introduction by Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London, 1992, p. 83.

¹⁷ "Anxiety is a *sympathetic antipathy* and an *antipathetic sympathy*." (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, edited and translated by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Andreson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1980, p. 42.

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *A Carcass*, translated by William Aggeler, <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/126> (accessed in 23.02.2014).

¹⁹ "He speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself. Thus Baudelaire placed the shock experience at the very center of his artistic work." (Walter Benjamin, *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, in Maria Damon, Ira Livingstone (Eds.), *Poetry And Cultural Studies. A Reader*, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 2009, p. 40.)