

CORNEL ȚĂRANU AND THE OBSESSION OF VARIATION*

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ABSTRACT

Starting with the statement of Vasile Herman, who presented Cornel Țăranu's creation as an oeuvre in continuous progress, the present article follows, on the same co-ordinate, aspects of works written (or rewritten) during 1980-1994. All these pieces are characterized by stylistic unity and high economy of means in approaching the musical material, that is itself, furthermore, quite limited. The main compositional technique is based on variation, which generates wide possibilities of rhythmic, melodic, timbral, harmonic etc. elaboration. The presence of the same generating elements in several works of different character (a trait valid for pieces of all genres) determines a spiritual communion of these pieces and is nothing more than an additional proof of the author's full artistic growth.

Keywords: Cornel Țăranu, Romanian contemporary music, variation techniques, melodic and rhythmic development, formal structure determined by the musical material or by the poetic text.

Cornel Țăranu's music is an occasion for a continuous fascination of an inner spiritual order determined by fundamental, similar rhythms of existence and populated by a small number of characters with related physiognomies and

* Translated from Romanian by the author.

characters, living and dying according to the same laws. Truly penetrating this world can only be achieved by choosing the path of its playful understanding, because creation is also a hidden game of great depth, free of prejudices, misunderstanding or ephemeral temptations. We are thus revealed the magic of a noble and secret beauty, which is offered to us generously and with an unbridled force of inspiration.

The pleasure of writing, the open curiosity in the face of an unknown that requires to be explored, the desire to compete with the self – all these are just a few motivations of the creative impulse, never strong enough if it were lacking the nostalgia of the game regarded as a bridge from science to art. The condition of creation is also to see the world and the objects that make it up in a constantly changing of nuance, and not of essence. This ensures the unity and variety of a work of life valid over time. A great creator will never succeed in depleting his own resources; the more he expands his inner space of exploration, the richer he will become. The more means of work there are, the greater their chances of regeneration and proliferation. In this vein, the creation of Cornel Țăranu is comparable to that of other European constructivist composers, such as Pierre Boulez or György Ligeti, who are also concerned with maintaining strict directions, but where there is boundless freedom. The obsession of variation, at all levels of the musical language, is a specific trait of these composers' works. As *an immanent feature of the material and spiritual world*¹, variation becomes the source of contrast. Skillful handling of these two elements, beside a number of other qualities necessary for a creator, is an indispensable condition for the emergence of an authentic and viable opus. Born under a lucky sign, Cornel Țăranu's creation presents all these traits, coupled with his personal distinction that is naturally framed by the stylistic landscape of the golden generation of contemporary Romanian music.

In his study *Cornel Țăranu – Medaillon*, published in "Muzica" 1981/2, Vasile Herman proposed, together with remarks related to the didactic, conductoral and musicological work of Cornel Țăranu, a very accurate periodization of his creation, based on stylistic aspects (the beginning belonging to the Enescu-Toduță tradition, with a modal language becoming, over time, more and more chromatic, after which elements of severe serialism will penetrate the background of a constant lyricism, and later, the increasing liberation of the musical writing, leading to controlled aleatorism). The works exemplified in this study reveal all these characteristics and prove clearly what Vasile Herman noticed by a key phrase: *Tout son oeuvre est mis sous le signed'une continuelle renovation*². This statement can be seen as the starting point of the present article, which will follow,

¹ Sigismund Toduță, *Formele muzicale ale Barocului în opera lui Johann Sebastian Bach*, vol. III, Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1978, p. 11.

² Vasile Herman, *Cornel Țăranu – Medaillon*, "Muzica" journal, Bucharest, 1981/2, p. 48.

on the coordinates of continuous renewal, aspects of works written (or rewritten) during 1980-1994. They consist of all musical genres, including film music, which portrays Cornel Țăranu as a composer of contrasts, his expressive palette balancing between anguish in *Întunecare* (1986, directed by Alexandru Tatos) and apparent serenity in *La sudul sufletului meu* (1988, directed by Frieder Schuler).

All these pieces are characterized by stylistic unity and high economy of means in approaching the musical material, that is itself, furthermore, quite limited. The main compositional technique is based on variation, which generates wide possibilities of rhythmic, melodic, timbral, harmonic etc. elaboration. The presence of the same generating elements in several works of different character (a trait valid for pieces of all genres) determines a spiritual communion of these pieces and is nothing more than an additional proof of the author's full artistic growth.

From *Prolegomene* for string quartet and piano (1981), which not only essentializes some Enescian motifs, but also announces a specific thematic field of creation, to *Traietorii* for seven instruments (1994), which is a synthesis work (perhaps even the conclusion of a chapter!), the chamber music signed by Cornel Țăranu is written on three coordinates. They summarize works with common or close characteristics, showing the composer's obsessions with restructuring and reformulating a pre-existing material. The first path is open to the oboe, clarinet and saxophone (*Sonata for oboe and piano*, *Improvisation for solo oboe*, *Three pieces for solo clarinet*, *Sonata rubato for oboe or solo clarinet*, *Sonata for clarinet and percussion*, *Sempre ostinato for saxophone, clarinet or oboe and Sempre ostinato II*, in which to the soloist is added an accompaniment of piano, percussion and string quintet). The second direction summarizes several solo sonatas for string instruments (violin, cello and double bass), and the third comprises rather singular works, but not lacking some references to previous pieces: *Ofrande* for 4 flutes, piano and percussion ad libitum, *Mozaicuri* for saxophone or clarinet, string quartet, piano and percussion, *Traietorii* for 7 instruments.

The first category of works is generated by the *Sonata for Oboe and Piano*, originally written between 1961-1963, but completed in the 1980s. The second movement of the sonata, *Improvisation*, of a soloistic character, was subsequently transformed into a different, new piece, which, despite the improvisational aspect (in the sense of free combinations of formulas extracted from the thematic material, some even placed in cassettes), has a structured form, designed with great precision. The quasi-free rhythmic writing of the second movement will also become a very personal style feature of the author, as it is almost unmissable in his next works. Is it perhaps a return of Cornel Țăranu to his old lyricism, temporarily abandoned in the late 1960s¹? It would not be excluded, because the case is not

¹ Vasile Herman talks about the *strict lyricism* of the creation period starting in 1966. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

singular. Music history knows some similar examples. It would, in fact, be an atavistic outburst of elements in continuous germination, inevitably appearing at some significant crossroad moments, thus proving their undeniable value as a model with germination characteristics.

The same *Improvisation* is present, partly, in the third movement of *Three pieces for solo clarinet* (1982) and in full, with the addition of a coda, in *Sonata rubato for oboe or solo clarinet* (1986), where the idea of the possibility of using different instruments is pleasing.

The variational circle continues with *Sonata for clarinet and percussion* (1985), in which the 2nd and the 3rd movement are transcriptions of the first two from *Three pieces for solo clarinet*. Thus, the color effects become richer in the middle part, where the percussion supports with a fine timbral halo the funeral song (*bocet*), or in the final ostinato, where it brings elements of counterpoint.

In the case of *Sempre ostinato* (1986) and *Sempre ostinato II* (1986-1988), one may notice the phenomenon of turning a solo work into one for a concertant ensemble. It is about a sonata form that requires from the performer an act of subtle intelligence and virtuosity. The means of elaboration, mainly of repetitive type, are very rich, the composer realizing a geometric spatialization of this material by continuous variation of a basic cell (transposition, recurrence, reversal, reversal of recurrence, rhythmic or melodic variation etc.). Moreover, the structural kinship of the two main themes is obvious. The sequences in which two motives are alternating through double variation, based on permutation and pitch accumulating techniques, are very interesting.

The three solo sonatas for string instruments (1988-1992) show close links with the pieces presented above, proving once again the composer's preferences for variation. Written without measures, but with well-defined rhythmic values, these sonatas are also an example of a certain material elaboration according to the technical possibilities of the instrument in question.

Ofrande III for 4 flutes and percussion ad libitum (1988) constitute a new side of *Ofrande I* and *Ofrande II*, both written in 1978. The piece contains a true outburst of lyricism generated by the natural inclination of the author towards the spiritual areas of eternal transhumance and denotes his continuous attention for expressing sincerely this affinity by *enriching elements of contemporary language in the specific sensitivity of our music*¹. The sound of the flutes, evoking Pan's instrument, is inserted into a rich polyphony, which, if intersected with the mobile motives from percussion, acquires, in addition to the free improvisation on a minimum material from the background, a solid construction of contrasting elements. (Here, again, there are several aspects of one and the same piece!)

¹ Cornel Țăranu, *Interviu*, "Tribuna" magazine, Cluj-Napoca, 1966/47, p. 5.

Traietorii for seven instruments (1994) consists of 5 movements that are played without interruption and can be considered a synthesis of the author's interest for the domain of chamber music. The ensemble has a more unusual and somewhat difficult instrumentation from the point of view of dynamic balances (flute, clarinet, trombone, percussion, piano, violin and cello), a problem that is, however, solved with (at least an apparent) ease. The work is remarkable mainly by the timbral expressiveness in constant harmony with the thematic material, which undoubtedly bears the specific stylistic imprints of the composer. Intensely chromatinized modal language, apparent rhythmic freedom, essentialization of themes, great flexible agogic arching, gradual elaboration of tensions etc. – all these are elements already well anchored in the music signed by Cornel Țăranu. But these works always appear in a different context, where the new combinations are totally original. There is a very high concentration of technical means and, by implication, of the musical expression, that is particularly contrasting. Thus, the incisiveness of the first movement opposes the lyrical *doina*-melody of the flute in the second movement. The fourth movement, which is a synthesis and contains the main climax, is followed by the surprisingly sensitive ending, achieved by improvisations of great finesse on special timbral effects.

I left for the end, intentionally, a chamber work that is related, by its virtuosity and scale, to the concertant genre: *Mozaicuri* for saxophone (or clarinet), string quartet, piano and percussion (1992). In all four movements, the focus is on the solo instrument, with the ensemble having only a discreet accompaniment consisting of pedals and rhythmizations of chords. The composer's main attention is to the saxophone, which acquires a pronounced cubist aspect through severe interval structuring, but in a free-variational manner. The work appears to be an echo of the large-scale concert for saxophone and orchestra written in 1990 and entitled *Miroirs*. Of course, in this case, the part of the ensemble is much more important, constantly mirroring, through the design and color of the material used, the speech and the role of the solo instrument. The concert begins with a reference chord, built from two similar groups (*G#-A-D-E* and *F-F#-C#-D#*), this pattern of organization having a catalyst role in the dramaturgy of the work.

Cornel Țăranu's symphonic works, analyzed by Vasile Herman in the study already mentioned (*Simfonia brevis*/1962, Second symphony *Aulodica*/1976), has as its main feature a tendency to merge the symphonic genre with the expressive spirit of *doina*, with which the composer communicates spiritually in discrete, but enduring ways. The symphonies written after 1980, keeping the sonata form that embraces this genre every time, are born after the author had conquered a new stylistic dimension: *l'orchestre acquiert des puissances expressive*

*nouvelles grâce à une écriture plus libre, non exempte des signes de ce que l'on pourrait appeler une musique aléatoire contrôlée*¹.

The 3rd symphony, *Semne* (1984), has a characteristic feature of Țăranu's music: the use of short, but essential themes. The work is based on two contrasting thematic blocks, the first of which has a dominant role both in the elaboration of the treatment and as a micro-refrain, which is less visible, but still present both in the recapitulation and in the coda.

The first theme presents a signal motive and contains the usual incisiveness specific to the traditional sonata. From this material derives the bridge, which can also be considered a second section of the first theme. Both incisions are followed by developments with pedals with special timbral effects, harmonic blocks orchestrated with instruments belonging to the same family or with repetitive moments leading to a climax. The second theme is divided into three sections and seems to suggest a lament (*bocet*). At its turn, this is immediately followed by a short elaboration with imitations, mirrors and mixtures, in which a first micro-refrain (from theme 1) is almost unnoticed.

The development is based on the material of the main theme, the contrasting nature of the four stages that make it up excluding any need to call another material. This moment is one of the most successful examples that demonstrates the virtuosity of Cornel Țăranu's compositional technique, based mainly on variation. Starting with an ostinato, the development will continue in its second section with a song of ample deployment, led by string instruments. This is extremely welcome after the previous scarce thematic material, which, even more so, had been in a continuous disintegration. This heartbreaking melody, reminiscent of some Enescian themes, is counterpointed by the brass with material from the bridge (a new micro-refrain!) and by the woods with fragments of itself, adding new sounds and more instruments. In this way there is a continuous accumulation, leading to the third section, pointillistic and somewhat hermetic. A last improvisation moment (with material from the bridge) links the development to the recapitulation that begins with the second theme. The reversal of the recapitulation comes in a natural way, being a consequence of the development elaboration based on the main theme.

The last section of the sonata form is not without surprises, such as the continual presence of micro-refrains or the phenomenon of double counterpoint in orchestration, the timbral coloring gaining in this way a new dimension. (In the exhibition, b1 appeared at the strings and b2 at the woods; in the recapitulation, the instrument groups change roles.) Even more surprising is the transformation of the main theme's expression, appearing in a hidden way, so that the thematic material is presented in obsessive harmonic structures, which achieve one last

¹ Vasile Herman, *Op.cit.*, p. 45.

climax. The coda evokes the Enescian lyricism from the development, but in a fragmented and improvised contouring, on uncertain, sliding and long pedals.

The 4th symphony, *Ritornelle* (1987), represents the synopsis of the composer's creation, which starts [...] *in the search of a synthesis that floats in the air* [...] and it is [...] *last but not least, [...] the ritornello of a friendship...*¹ This work is dedicated to the late composer Mihai Moldovan, whose creation is characterized by specific musical structures and textures that are reminded in the pages of the score.

Written also in a sonata form, *Ritornelle* presents some similarities with the previous symphony: short themes, the appearance of a large melody in the development, the tendency toward an unusual order in the recapitulation – b1, b3, b2 – (the last two sections showing some kinship), the richly colored orchestration, sometimes even with sounds close to electronic music, such as those of the timbral blocks in crescendo-decrescendo or those of acute pedals at the strings, combined with obsessive improvisations based on an augmented 4th and creating a strange feeling of loneliness. More prominent than in the third symphony, there is a tendency here to use a ritornello, which not only gives the title of the work, but combines the sonata form with that of a rondo.

The two main themes have noticeable interval profiles, which, in the context of the tempo, orchestration and different attack manners, are attaining special personalities. This material is also developed by methods that remind us of Mihai Moldovan's composition technique (permutations, textures, specific harmonic structures). One can notice here, again, the richness of the variation, almost inexhaustible, with a choice of themes chosen according to their ability to endure an extensive variational labor. This is also present in larger structures, such as the first stage of the development, where the large string melody is repeated with variations in interaction with the textures presented at other instruments, based on the same material.

The works captured in the brief analysis above represent creations of great expressiveness, in which the composer has conquered harmony between himself and his outer world through an aesthetic adventure provoked by the desire to achieve an agreement between intelligence, determination, intuition, imagination and sensitivity. But for the universe of this agreement to increase its complexity, a continuous destruction and rebuilding in various, but unitary forms, is required.

Thus, another genre that occupies an important place in Cornel Țăranu's creation is the vocal-instrumental music. In this setting, the solo voices are accompanied by various ensembles, from the piano and clarinet string trio (*Cântece întrerupte*), to the chamber orchestra (*Memento*). The author's preference for such a direct and, on the other hand, sensitive instrument as the human voice, which can

¹ Cornel Țăranu, LP cover of Electrecord ST-ECE 03980, 1988.

be used under all its complex technical and expressive aspects, seems to shine in this type of works. They are mostly highlighted by the balance of orchestration and by the choice of instrumental timbres most suited to the atmosphere dictated by the text. Of course, in the field of this genre there is a certain precedent: the sequence of songs for voice and piano signed by the author in the period before the 80s. Perhaps the composer felt the need to express himself with the help of a more colorful and diverse timbral apparatus than the piano, eventually turning to other instruments (and benefiting from the important collaboration of the chamber ensemble he leads as a conductor – *Ars Nova* – a real laboratory of experimentation, that allowed us to listen to so many masterpieces!). A series of older vocal-symphonic works, of large range (*Cântare unui ev aprins, Stejarul lui Horea, Cortegiul, Supplex II, Cantus Transylvaniae*) also influences, in a relevant way, the wide and rich arching of the 8 chamber cantatas written after 1980: *Cântece fără dragoste* (1980), *Cântece nomade* (1982), *Orfeu* (1985), *Cântece fără răspuns* (1986-1988), *Hommage à Paul Celan* (1989), *Memento* (1989), *Dedicații* (1991), *Cântece întrerupte* (1993).

The approached poetic text was and remains further of an expressionist nature. If until now the composer's preferences have turned mainly to authors of great tradition, such as Lucian Blaga, Nicolae Labiș, Camil Petrescu, Ady Endre, the chamber cantatas have as their starting point texts by poets of great modernity (Nichita Stănescu, Cezar Baltag, Paul Celan). The poems addressed have a special musicality, revealed by their rhythmic-melodic setting manner that Cornel Țăranu proposes; moreover, sometimes the declamation becomes so necessary, that almost every cantata requires the transformation of the vocalization into recitation, or the appearance of a specialized orator, who does his score almost singing (*Cântece fără dragoste, Cântece nomade, Cântece fără răspuns, Dedicații*).

Of course, the choice of poems is dictated by the composer's affinity to certain themes, such as play, love or death – regarded as fundamental myths, which he approaches by the ritual path of art. Cornel Țăranu confessed, not infrequently, during the first performances of his cantatas, his spiritual solidarity with the poems he chose ([...] *I'm nothing but these songs [...] Our soul identifies with magic, poetry, approaches nature, the mysteries of life, love and death.*¹ – *Cântece nomade*) or with the authors of the respective texts ([...] *this work was written by Nichita through us [...]*² – *Cântece fără răspuns*).

Within the unity of their musical language, the eight cantatas appear to be born from Leda's egg. The rhythmic-melodic design of the score, the aspects of harmony and polyphony, the types of shape contouring – all these reveal the

¹ Cornel Țăranu, speech at the first performance of the cantata *Cântece nomade*, March 1983.

² Cornel Țăranu, speech at the first performance of the cantata *Cântece fără răspuns*, March 1988.

composer's constant concern for the economy of material, and on the other hand, his solid and original compositional technique.

By following certain constants related to the melodic material, it would be to signal some musical motives that have become, by their frequency of use, true archetypes. They have a generating role and make their mark on the type of composition techniques. The following examples propose to observe the variational labor that starts from structures based on seconds (whose agglomeration leads inevitably to clusters) or on thirds (this interval becoming a pillar in the melodic construction). Continuous variation is achieved through a multitude of processes: additions of sounds, rhythmic changes, inversions, recurrences, transpositions, change of harmonic or polyphonic context etc. Combining them generates a very wide range of melodic elaboration possibilities, which could nevertheless be framed into two main types: the repetitive-static type (achieved by continuous varied repetition, within a restricted ambitus) and the accumulative-dynamic type (formulated by the expansion of the ambitus).¹ This form of development does not exclude allusions to some *bocet* or *doina* chants, folkloric vocal genres based on continuous improvisation on certain specific rhythmic-melodic formulas.

In some of the cantatas we capture a large thematic unit (*Cântece nomade* – built on a symmetrical micro-mode inspired by a phone number, according to the Master!, *Memento* – based on two main themes that intersect and complement each other in the final movement, *Orfeu* – in which the first theme dominates, like a stylized passacaglia). In other cases, the material is more diverse, with more vague kinships, but linked by a ritornello (*Cântece fără răspuns* – 5 songs for baritone, accompanied by piano, percussion, and string quartet, connected by clarinet interventions).

The harmony of the cantatas takes shape from the melodic material (where chromatic micro-modes are preferred), Cornel Țăranu following the great Enescian tradition. From the accumulation of the pitches belonging to certain modes, often result clusters used as static or mobile pedals or as highlighting for accented word syllables. Chordal aggregates have also an important structural role, especially revealed in *Cântece fără răspuns*, in which a ritornello, placed between the songs, is nothing more than an invention of the clarinet, based on six related chords (each of them containing three consecutive notes). Harmonic movements also generate tension accumulations, consistent with the development of the formal structure.

¹ These melody patterns are mainly due to the meaning of the literary text. In the first case, they are mostly ritualistic texts, evoking the drama of death. (*Cântece nomade/Oleandru*– the story of a gypsy obsessed with his shadow; *Memento/I*– the image of the poet's mother, deported and missing in the East). In a second case, the melodic patterns are determined, along with the tense nature of the verse, by the formal structure of the pieces, calling for the appearance of climaxes.

As for the rhythmic development, we capture the continuous correlation of elements of giusto-syllabic with those of parlando-rubato. This is achieved almost continuously by quasi-freebut measured writing. Hence a great richness of rhythmic relationships. The objectivity of values combinations, generated by the prosody organization, merges with the subjectivity of the composer, who finds necessary to use a flexible line, an unstable, apparently unbalanced and fragile movement. The original notation of the musical score makes feel the performance permanently unstable. The rhythmic grammar is an example of great refinement and a consequence of contemporary Romanian composers' preoccupation for musical languages that synthesize elements of different rhythmic systems. The rhythmic contouring that Cornel Țăranu engages in his cantatas is similar to that of traditional folk music, where one remarks *the presence of an elementary intonational nucleus under conditions of intense quantitative transformation of the rhythmic element*.¹ Of course, inspiration is not exclusively related to the Romanian folklore repertoire, but also to the universal one. An eloquent example of this would be the final part of *Cântece nomade/Tarot*, where a great giusto moment appears on two Indian rhythms (Theka and Chitra), evoking the meditative-ludic phenomenon of rhythmic improvisations that are still practiced today in Nepal. They are based on rhythmic models (*tala*) described by Bharata in the 5th century. (Some similar patterns were also reported by the musicologist Al-Kindi in the Arabic music of the 9th century.)²

The eight cantatas mainly present strophic patterns, due to the formal structure of the used poems. However, there is no shortage of allusions to rondo (*Cântece nomade/De-a râsul, Oleandru, Cântece fără răspuns*), variations (*Cântece nomade/Remember*) or even sonata (*Memento*).

Determining the musical macro-articulation, the structure of the text is sovereign in the choral poems *Horea* (1985) and *Testament* (1988), both being great achievements of Cornel Țăranu in the choral genre. Thus, the lyrics of *Horea*, signed by Nichita Stănescu, carried out according to the principle refrain and variation, determine the configuration of the musical construction. The work is written in an intensely chromatinized and predominantly homophonous language (with short polyphonic moments where the voices are individualized). Phrases started in unison and led to conclusions of chordal aggregates (mostly cluster type) are here characteristic. This creates a permanent contrast, and a successful gradation is outlined through the continuous varied replays and accumulations of the material.

Testament for equal voices (or mixed chorus) and contralto solo is distinguished by a musical writing of great beauty, which uses the old techniques

¹ Gheorghe Firca, *Asupra unui principiu de variație specific creației contemporane românești*, in "Studii de muzicologie", Editura Muzicală, Bucharest, 1970, vol. VI, p. 9.

² Darvas Gábor, *A totemzenétöl a hegedűversenyig*, Zeneműkiadó Budapest, 1977.

of ison, antiphony and heterophony. An infra-chromatic solo recitative, where the prosody of the text¹ determines the articulation of the musical movement is grafted against the bright and diatonic background of the choir, which sings a *polychronion* of Byzantine inspiration, suggesting the monastic atmosphere.

Returning to Vasile Herman's assertion that continuous renewal is a basic feature of Cornel Țăranu's creation, one can conclude that this phenomenon always manifests itself after the exhaustion of a very wide field of expression possibilities, generated by only a few basic ideas. This determines largely the composer's unity of thought and language and produces a vast space in which his works anchor, extracting their own building elements. Of course, when the possibilities of elaboration are prodigious (a sign of a rich imagination and a good knowledge of compositional techniques), there is a tendency to use the material in several works, thus sliding towards the danger of monotony. Aware of this, the composer resorts to creative solutions still unaddressed, thus calling for the precedents of a new stylistic period.

At the end of a chapter, Cornel Țăranu's creative work seeks a new order to justify its own existence. In this context, although the spirit is prior to feeling, the experience does not go beyond imagination, which is always the banner of progress. And because progress also requires knowledge, Cornel Țăranu remains an eternal seeker, an explorer of his own world and that of the others, with a predilection for research and experimentation, and later, for expressing phenomena that reflect deep experiences, generated by the adventure of knowledge itself, populated by the monads that never cease to lure: *wirst das Leben besserkennen, / wenn du uns verstehen lernst.*²

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¹ Doamna Theofana's Will, mother of Mihai Viteazul, from the 16th Century.

² Christian Morgenstern, *Galgenberg, Alle Galgenlieder*, Insel-Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1947, p.18.