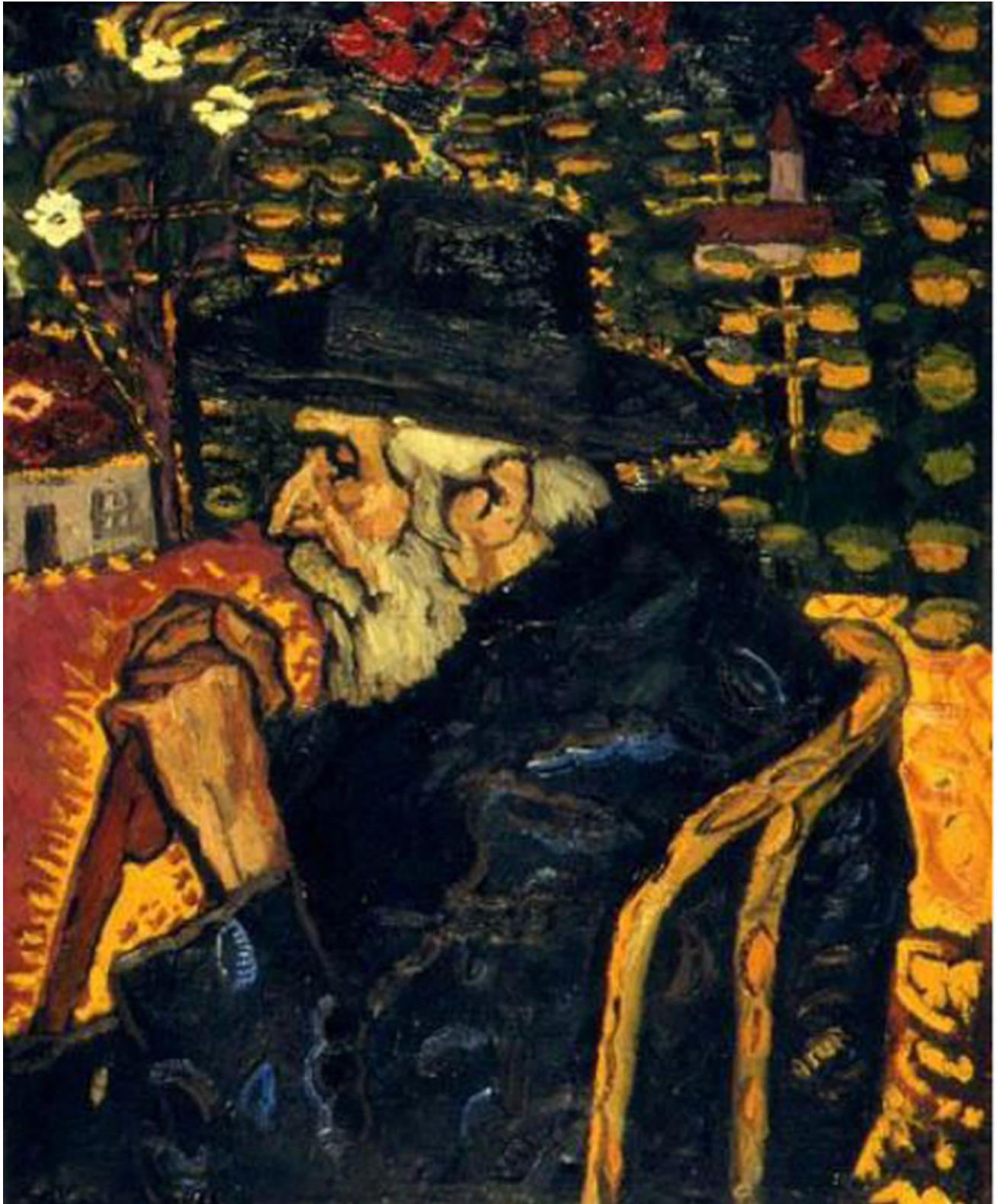


The Art of Poetry, the Art of Death

by [Jeffrey Burghauser](#) (February 2023)



Portrait of My Grandfather, Ion Tuculescu, 20th c

The nimble nurse was giving me the tour
About the bolted, candy-colored ward
Appended to the fancy hospice where
I'd recently applied to work, my dreams
Of literary greatness having been
Exposed as what they ultimately were.
Some radical, appalling penances
Had now become, I felt, imperative.

Amid the pointless-seeming human mess
That one expects to find amid fatigued,
Congested, peppery electric heat,
My vision fixed upon a certain man.
I thought I saw defiance underneath
The fact that he, uniquely, didn't wear
The standard-issue, greyish patient gown,
But kept the clothes that one associates
With sainted grandfathers—the sort of man
Dispensing butterscotches to the kids,
And, to their older siblings, sound advice
On how to test the quality of love
Or carpentry. They make us love the world.

However, this effect was undermined
By everything that he was powerless
To discipline: by all the poltergeists
Inhabiting the tendons of the hand,
And by the pain apparent in the brow,
And by the eyes, and by the head itself:
Broad, rusty-spalted, swinging back & forth,
Forgotten, like a rustic mansion's door
Displaced from half its hinges by a storm.

The nurse observed my curiosity.

"That's Jerry. He was an optometrist,"
She said, appending (all the wisdom of
Her words at disconcerting variance
With everything inherent to her tone:
Bourgeois, Midwestern, peaceably obtuse):
"Poor Jerry still can't really understand
That this is what his life is gonna be."

I recollect that it was Donald Hall
Who slighted Dylan Thomas, claiming that
The Welshman had, though often luminous,
Composed not "poems," but merely "Poetry"—
Not individual, ferocious things
Of excellence, appliances of breath
Assigning names to nameless elements,
But merely sublunary instances
Of something like a Heavenly Ideal.

I'm brushed by hints that Poetry must be
To Death exactly as a poem is
To dying, to a dying: the discrete
Phenomenon—exceptional, perverse.
A person is condemned to undergo
A dying just as our poet is
Condemned in fire to originate
Those burning instances & frigid types
Of Beauty—species of the thing that Sin
Delivered forth into the pulsing world.

Originality cannot be planned.
*"Poor Jerry still can't really understand
That this is what his life is gonna be."*
O save my simple soul from Poetry.
O find a way You may suspend the breath
Without the evil novelty of Death.
"O let me be," I beg of Heaven's King,

“A perfectly banal, generic thing.”

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Jeffrey Burghauser is a teacher in Columbus, OH. He was educated at SUNY-Buffalo and the University of Leeds. He currently studies the five-string banjo with a focus on pre-WWII picking styles. A former artist-in-residence at the Arad Arts Project (Israel), his poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Appalachian Journal*, *Fearsome Critters*, *Iceview*, *Lehrhaus*, and *New English Review*. Jeffrey's book-length collections are available on [Amazon](#), and his website is www.jeffreyburghauser.com.

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