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REDISCOVERING PRIMITIVISM IN THE ROMANIAN POETRY OF THE '60S

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Abstract: *The present article examines the characteristic tendency of four Romanian poets of the 60's to emphasize in their poetry the origins, traditions, and to reinstate the connections with natural forces. Already commented by critics as Expressionists, they are as well seen and investigated here as Primitivists. Their creation is seen as a remake deprived of metaphysics of Lucian Blaga's poetry in a postwar historical moment when there was a need for reaffirmation of rural origins and of authenticity of the poetic discourse.*

Keywords: *primitivism, expressionism, origins, tradition, Romanian post-war poetry.*

The influence historical German Expressionism had on Romanian literature was visible not only in the interwar epoch and in the literary creation of a few poets, such as Lucian Blaga or Aron Cotruş, who were themselves very close to the German cultural space. The phenomenon of *pseudo-morphosis* (Crohmălniceanu, 1978) as a result of a catalytic relationship between German and Romanian culture, was quite fruitful. The free assimilation of German Expressionism in the Romanian cultural space led to an "underground life" of Expressionist potentialities and, beginning with the '60s, even to the establishment of an Expressionist "tradition" in the inner life of Romanian poetry.

In Romanian literature Expressionism was understood primarily in its spiritual dimension, as a sign of the crisis of the relation modern man has with cosmos, the unlimited, surrounding nature and transcendent. At the same time it was perceived as indicating a way of salvation. "*Europe is about to create a new metaphysics and a new spiritual collectivism*" noted Lucian Blaga in *Probleme estetice*. (Blaga, 1990, 58, author's emphasis) We appreciate from the interwar period L. Blaga's major influence in establishing in our cultural space one long lasting meaning of Expressionism which stressed upon words like "ecstatic", "cosmic", "native", and "apocalyptic". Expressed in *Filosofia stilului*, Blaga's choice for defining Expressionism is in complete agreement with re-founding these connections through myth and participation to the vegetal cycle as seen from his first two volumes of poetry. As Cornel Moraru has emphasized "the poet choose from the Expressionist arsenal mainly the cosmic aspects (…) the idea of an organic wholeness, the need for a (…) harmonious and balanced unity" (Moraru 46) with the clear purpose, also defined in Expressionist aesthetics, to save "the last divine residuum in the human being" (Moraru 92).

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Blaga privileges the tendency towards absolute and the connection with cosmos as the characteristics and fundamental values of an Expressionist work of art: "*As long as a subject is rendered in such a way so its inner power or tension surpasses it, transcends it, revealing relations with cosmic, the absolute, or the unlimited,* that is an Expressionist work of art." (Blaga, 1977, 27, author's emphasis) For this purpose, he was called "a metaphysical Expressionist" (Doinaş 209).

This narrowing definition of Expressionism had a long life in the history of Romanian poetry. Revived in the critical works of the '60s by critics such as Eugen Simion, Şt. Aug. Doinaş, and Ovidiu Cotruş, it was mainly applied to comment the poetical works of some of their contemporary poets. Grouped by Eugen Simion under the common name of "peasant Expressionism", Ion Gheorghe, Ion (Ioan) Alexandru, Gheorghe Pituț, and George Alboiu are poets of rural origins writing a poetry of a "spiritualized, cosmic lyricism" (Simion 234), marked by a tendency to "concentrate not only the expression but also the lyric material, based (…) on the apperception of a rural universe" (Simion 234). This lyricism is embodied in "representations that translate, more often, a cosmic feeling and a remarkable intuition of the elementary forces of life." (Simion 234) Two sources, included in the same *Weltanschauung* are considered by E. Simion important for this poetic attitude: first is a cultural one, the poetry of Lucian Blaga and through his writings the Expressionists' experience, the second one, more familiar and closely related to their background is folkloric animism.

However, not only Blaga's poetry can be seen as the main catalyst for the poetic creation of "peasant Expressionists". Through their common propensity, the intensified perception of the elementary forces of nature, they enforce the contact with other interwar poets such as B. Fundoianu or, even closer, with Aron Cotruş. The same dense materiality of the world is grasped in their poems, be it an attribute of a genetic moment of the universe, as in the poetry of Ion Gheorghe, Ion Alexandru or George Alboiu, or an attribute of its apocalypse, in the poetry of the same Ion Alexandru, Gheorghe Pituț and George Alboiu.

The poets of the '60s are drawn towards these two moments comprising gigantic manifestations of natural forces. They represent themselves as the ones who still have access to the origins, by transfiguring the common rural way of life, being interested in seizing the hidden, elementary forces of nature seen under their genetic, energetic representation. Reaching and portraying these origins is one of their major themes, developed in poetry with rural subjects.

The action of rendering the origins as primitive, therefore immersed in primordial times is particularly accomplished by projecting traditional activities in fabulous dimensions, by revealing their repetitive character, or by using literary patterns of popular ritualistic poetry, mainly the enchantment, as in poems by Ion Gheorghe (in *Megalitice*): "Se sculă Muma zeiță, se spălă pe mâini,/ văzu luna ca ugerii vacilor –/ puse la cale zămislirea sfintei pâini,/ urzirea mărturiilor şi-a colacilor;/ un pumn de pietre de râu/ aruncă-n apa ca sângele de peşte –/ ceva tulbure, trosnind, turnă-n făina de grâu/ ce zămisleşte;/ băşici ca ouăle de broască,/ gogoloaie rostogolite de nevăzutele vietăți,/ din care să nască/ sprintene zeități." (*Descântec de frământat pâinea*) Other poetic strategies can relate even to the transformations of the lyrical self implied by the connection with the origins. In Ion Alexandru's poetry, milk is seen as a divine liquid, provoking a self-

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intoxication of the poet who praises the vital force of his body: "Beau lapte din şiştar şi mă cuprind fiori, / Că prea-i bun laptele şi proaspăt – cum să spun / Parcă beau soare amestecat cu nori, / Sunt zeul tinereții ce-n lapte mă răzbun!" (*Beau lapte*)

The transfiguration of the natural forces takes place in the context of common daily events lived with intensity, revealing the joy of being a part of nature, certain pantheism of the body connected to the universe. The jubilation of the wholeness of vital forces in Ion Alexandru's poetry has mainly a personal motive, "imposing a lyrical biography growing natural from a background of an ancestral sensibility searching for expression" (Pop 192). It can be seen as well as an echo, entirely genuine but also corresponding to a cultural attitude of a Dionysian ecstasy reached by the Expressionists like Ernst Stadler or Lucian Blaga in his first poems.

Compared with the Expressionists from the beginning of the 20th century, the artists of *Die Brücke* in search of pure nature and freedom of the body seen as a way to retrieve the fundamental forces of life threatened by "the rampant effects of modern capitalism – industrialization, urbanization, rationalisation and secularization" (Bassie 47), Romanian poets of the '60s are situated from the beginning of their poetic activity at the origins.

This position allows them both to indulge in the poetical theme of perceiving the energetic forces of nature, as well as to write about the opposite one, the anguish provoked by the same extinguished forces. On a surface level of their poetry, this last theme renders the dissolution of the rural world subjected to the process of modernization. This process is dramatically perceived by Ion Alexandru, as menacing the human condition, seen under the sign of Passions: "Suntem pe-o navă-n ape care se scufundă,/ geamurile sunt roase de părul întunericului,/ în colțul mesei sar peste cuțit vinete flăcări…/ Înstrăinat, frigul se cațără în noi/ şi adormim strânşi laolaltă/ şi nu mai are nimenea nimic de spus." (*Ape*)

The world view common to all poets above, interwar as well as postwar – understood as *Weltgefühl* (Weisstein 262) – can be summarized by the Expressionist attitude indicating the will to perceive, beyond "the appearances' veil" a force, an eternal essence behind worlds' phenomena. As early as 1910 nature was reconsidered again, in a prolonged Romantic view, the depositary of a hidden force, so the Expressionist artist wanted to "penetrate to the essence of things where nature speaks for itself" (Morgan 327). In an essay entitled *The New Painting* Franz Marc (qtd. in Morgan 327) stresses on what should be the new aim of art: "Today we seek beneath the veil of appearances the hidden things in nature, which seem more important to us than the discoveries of the impressionists.... And, indeed, we seek and paint this inner, spiritual side of nature not out of whim or desire for something different, but because we see this side just as they 'saw' violet shadows and aether over all things." The same principles of creation clearly exposed by Franz Marc were active in Expressionist writing. Ulrich Weisstein concludes about the Expressionist style: "the Expressionists, more or less ignoring historical truth, wished to pierce the outer shell of ordinary reality and to descend from surface to depth, from appearance to essence (*Wesen*, *Kern*), with the intention of subsequently projecting that core, in a highly condensed and concentrated form (*Ballung*, *Spitzen*) and with the utmost intensity, back into external reality, causing the latter to be – or at least to appear – distorted." (Weisstein 271)

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Reinstating the connection with forces of nature and the will to find the essence of things are both poetic aims for the "peasant Expressionists" who often prove abilities of a visionary poetic discourse. Common to all Romanian poets discussed above is nevertheless the conviction that only the rural space, traditional, ritualized life can bear a connection with the origins. This type of discourse praising the autochthony expressed by Blaga both in his poetry and in some of his essays, reappeared after a decade of poetic "social realism". What were entirely striking in Ion Gheorghe's poetry were the "sudden fusion of poetry with reality" (Mincu 614) and the rehabilitation of authenticity, of the biographic self. These characteristics can also explain the attention with which they were read at the beginnings, despite the fact that authenticity was soon replaced by incongruous rhetoric.

"Peasant expressionism", "indigenous ruralism" can be seen as embodiments of Primitivism as concept. To understand the cyclic apparition of the ancestral fundamentals in the history of Romanian poetry we can use the observations of Vita Fortunati (qtd. in White 17) on the relations of primitivism with modernism: "The main hypothesis of (my) research is that Primitivism has a cyclic appearance in Western history, as long as the re-appropriation of the primitive constitutes a retroactive projection generated by the awareness of the socio-cultural crisis of an 'epoch'". Even if this study does not have as intentions to closely examine the correlation between poetical creation and the socio-historical context, we notice, following some observations made by Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, a significant correspondence between "the particular impulses inside modernism to regress towards 'primitive' origins" (White 17) and important historical moments that triggered it: Blaga's poetry and Romanian situation after the WWI, the re-discovery of the same origins in the poetry of the '60s after more than a decade of Proletcult and Soviet domination.

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