The Cosmopolitism of the Romanian Avant-Garde

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As Eugène Ionesco defined the avant-garde "in terms of opposition and rupture", characterizing the vanguardist as "an opponent to the existing system" (Ionesco 1998: 77-78), it follows that cosmopolitism could be considered, from the very beginning, a main characteristic of every avant-garde. In a famous essay published in the eighties under the title *Éloge du cosmopolitisme*, Guy Scarpetta was defining cosmopolitism the movement of rejection of any "ideological device of root-striking" that connects the individual to the collective phantasms of the tribe, the nation, the race, etc., this ideological device meaning, in essence, "the nation transcending the individual, the instinct of the race, force, antidemocracy, blood and the homeland, paganism, the refusal of the universal associated with the refusal of monotheism, the understanding of language as a fact of nature, of the stranger as a threat, of modern culture as decadence, all sustained by an archaism of substance." (Scarpetta 1997: 82) The main cosmopolitan themes would be, therefore: "the impossible community, the non-affiliation, the individuality irreducible to the «roots» or to the «social bond»" (Scarpetta 1997: 230). From an ideological perspective, one could discern a set of binary oppositions in which the first term is positive: *cosmopolitism/ nationalism, Diaspora/ homeland, speech/ nature, individual/ species, universal/ local, progress/ regress*, etc. By its challenging attitude, the avant-garde, in Scarpetta's opinion, undermines the "device of root-striking" through its lack of piety towards origins, towards national traditions, towards the so-called "racial patrimony" or towards the "purity of language", as well as through the transgression of all frontiers (spatial, linguistic, cultural, etc.). However, the same author points out in a chapter entitled *L'ambiguité des avant-gardes* ["The Ambiguity of Avant-Gardes"] that the cosmopolitan creed wouldn't have been entirely respected, as almost all avant-garde movements manifested, paradoxically, the opposite tendency of subordination to what Philippe Nemo called "the thoughts of the community" (such as, in the case of Italian futurism, the adhesion to fascism, or, in the case of French surrealism, the regression, after the war, to paganism, etc.); on the other hand, one must not forget the programmatic and narrow-sectarian character of the avant-garde, which has lead to dogmatism and to

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gestures of fanatic intolerance (see the attacks against other congeneric movements and the exclusions similar to the excommunications from the religious sects).

Are these observations still pertinent in the case of the Romanian avant-garde? To answer this question, we must search exactly for those features that individualize it among the analogous European movements, namely the elements that would contradict Scarpetta's diagnosis. First, we must notice here the unusually great number of poets and artists of Jewish origin: Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Fondane, Ilarie Voronca, Claude Sernet, Saşa Pană, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Dolfi Trost, Isidore Isou, Marcel Iancu, Victor Vrauner, Jules Perahim, Max Hermann Maxy, Jacques Hérold, Arthur Segal, etc., the reason for which the avant-garde was attacked by the extreme right as representing the occult interests of the Jewish-freemasonic or/and Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy (see also the name of "artistic Bolshevism" applied as a pejorative label to the whole Romanian avant-garde), an accusation also regarding its cosmopolitism, as, from Scarpetta' s point of view, the theme of anti-cosmopolitan fight had always been a corollary of anti-Semitism (Scarpetta 1997: 56) Thus, for instance, the poet Horia Stamatu maintained, in an article published in 1937 in the legionary magazine "Buna Vestire", that "what is leftist in letters and arts (the avant-garde) goes hand in hand with the political left, (…) defiling all the sacred values of our nation and mystifying a spirituality that is nothing but the very visible disguise of the idea of class struggle." (Naum, Păun, Teodorescu: 1945) In a letter to Tristan Tzara written in the same year, Saşa Pană spoke of a violent campaign unleashed in the fascist press "against the new and pornographic literature" and "against the Judaicisation of Romanian literature", emphasizing the important role played by Nicolae Iorga and Al. Brătescu-Voineşti in the arresting of the "pornographers" Geo Bogza and H. Bonciu (Manuscriptum 1982: 158).

Naturally, the Bolshevism of the avant-garde was not an invention. From the beginning, its political engagement must be viewed as closely related to the project of radically changing the way of life in a future society. Following the example of their French fellows, the majority of the Romanian vanguardists openly sustained the proletarian revolution, many of them even joining the Communist Party in a moment when its activity had been declared officially illegal. Socially frustrated because of class and racial discriminations, their political option was probably perfectly justified at that moment, as the idea of an egalitarian society must have been, from their point of view, extremely seductive. In the articles published during the fourth decade in the reviews of left orientation *Viaţa imediată* ["The Immediate Life"], *Cuvântul liber* ["The Free Word"], *Tânăra generaţie* ["The Young Generation"], *Umanitatea* ["Humanity"], *Reporter, Era nouă* ["The New Era"], *Fapta* ["Action"], *Meridian*, etc. the members of the Romanian avant-garde vehemently denounced the exploitation of the proletariat, the officially encouraged anti-Semitism, the fascist danger, and the increasingly threatening specter of the war, meanwhile sustaining the idea of an "engaged" (or "revolutionary") literature. From this project, there emerged a series of specific genres, such as "proletarian poetry", the "proletarian novel", and the "reportage poem", but one may say that the idea of revolution animated the majority of the literary creations published at that time by Geo Bogza, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Gellu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu,

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Stephan Roll, etc. Therefore, no wonder that the avant-garde was perceived from the very beginning as a dangerous enemy situated, according to Ionesco's definition, within the very citadel which, with the aid of occult external forces, it was mightily striving to demolish. That was the reason why the attacks against it were not confined to benign literary polemics: a book published recently by Stelian Tănase, for instance (*The Romanian Avant-garde in the Archives of the Romanian Political Police*, 2008), reproduces the Romanian Political Police records of Geo Bogza, Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Victor Brauner, Jules Perahim, Scarlat Callimachi, Ion Călugăru, Gheorghe Dinu, Saşa Pană, M.H. Maxy, who were surveilled and sometimes arrested for supposed subversive activities under the direct guidance of the Romanian Communist Party. However, in spite of the conclusion of the author (who maintains that the Romanian avant-garde would dream to bring the Russian tanks to Bucharest), one should notice that the last avant-garde, namely, the surrealist group founded by Gherasim Luca and Gellu Naum in 1940, refused to endorse the new "device of root-striking", detaching itself from Stalinism and from the socialist realism imposed after 1947 as the only aesthetic formula officially accepted, this being the reason why the group was forced to dissolve shortly after the establishment of the communist regime. Otherwise, the texts published by its members during that period, many of them in French, were entirely apolitical at a moment when not to be politically engaged was considered, from the official point of view, an inexcusable heresy.

Despite the officially preached nationalism, the Romanian avant-garde had from the very beginning the ambition of internationalization, transgressing the territorial borders, traveling and engaging in cultural exchanges with the congeneric European movements. The members of the Romanian avant-garde published also in foreign reviews or participated in artistic events (congresses, exhibitions, etc.) organized abroad, and, conversely, one may notice the presence of numerous foreign names in the Romanian avant-garde publications and in the exhibitions of modern art organized in Bucharest starting with 1928, under the patronage of the review *Contimporanul* ["The Contemporary"]. Otherwise, out of a genuine obsession with uprooting, many members of the Romanian avant-garde went into voluntary exile before or soon after the war, some of them gaining international recognition as names of reference in modern art. One must notice that very few finally settled in Israel, as the vanguardists seemed to refuse that "promised land" dreamt by the Zionists, whom they had always disapproved, preferring instead more cosmopolitan adoptive countries, especially France, the cradle of the avant-garde. The same refusal of root-striking urged them, even when living in Romania, to write in French, the international language of the avant-garde, or to exile themselves in their own language, decomposing and recomposing it *ad libitum* in order to create an autonomous poetic language, genuinely international. Famous indeed have remained, for instance, the "leopard" language of Virgil Teodorescu and the "prodigious stuttering" of Gherasim Luca (as Gilles Deleuze called it); before going into exile, the former had published, in 1947, a poem called *Niciodată destul* ["Never enough"], which had already announced the French poetic experiments that were to make him famous later. Starting from the word *proportional*, which is decomposed and recombined at random, according to the principle of phonetic

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contiguity, with other similarly decomposed words, the poem in question cannot be read otherwise than as a pure phonological score, like the much more famous *Passionnément*:

> propopopopoporpor proporporporţi/ proporţiporţi porţiproporporţi proporpopor poporpopor/ proporţisorţi proposorţi proposorţi prea mulţi morţi/ prea multe torţe propoforţe prea multe propoforţe/ propropropormor promoprotozor mori în zori proton/ proporproton care ton protonproprotoni care toni/ protoni propropropriul meu plop ploproprod/ aprodafrod proprafrodiziacprozaicpro propor/ porpor por în cor rog por pentru popor/ propor rog popor să mori/ contrapropopor fără bor la popor/ la cotor un singur por proporporpor/ proporproporţi proporţiporţi/ proporţionproporţionapro/ proporţionpion prospion propor/ proporspion spion la pion la pian/ prosperi popor protosferă prompt la popor/ proporporpor/ proporporporporporc un porc de popor/ proporţionpopor proporţionapropro apropo/ asta propun proprop ropopun un porc/ de popor proporţional

Naturally, the cosmopolitan bet aims also at the proper creation of the avant-garde, both on the thematic and on the formal level. The first thing one may notice is its eminently anti-national character, in the sense that, thematically, it does not refer to an autochthonous nature, to a "spirit of the nation", to a specific *paideuma*, or to other "roots" of Romanianness. In other words, Romanian avant-garde art is not Romanian, as it refuses the rooting in the "national specific" obstinately searched by the traditionalists. And if the old traditional themes do appear, it is only that they should be amended. Even in the first pre-avant-garde poems of Adrian Maniu and Tristan Tzara, published before the First World War (1912-1915), one can discern the intention of denying all the stock clichés of traditionalist literature: the ancestral village, the peasant's brotherhood with the land, the protective nature, the religiosity, the pure love, the great national myths, etc. Some poems are pure ironic retorts to well known creations, and, as a matter of fact, they couldn't exist in the absence of the parodied reference (see, for instance, the dramatic poem *Salomeea or the consequences of a bad education*, published by Adrian Maniu in 1915, a demystifying charge against the sacred history of John the Baptist). Later, this polemical intention will be programmatically asserted, starting with the first manifestos published in the review *Contimporanul*. On the formal level, destructuring is aimed at on all levels of the discourse, from the phonetic to the semantic level, the extreme case being the phonetic poem, the fortuitous collage, the "words in freedom", or the "automatic speech". It seems that the authors in question, for fear of becoming enrooted in a national language, wanted to destroy its internal structure at all costs. Thus, they seem to share Wittgenstein's conception of language as "language-game", that is, the use of language in the service of the interests of a group, namely a national community. Considering Wittgenstein's assertion that: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world", one may infer that these poetic experiments were meant to transcend all limits of language in order to capture a more complete image of the world. For example, the poem absurdly entitled *Binomul cu exponentul de argint* ["The Binomial with the Silver Exponent"], published by Mihail Cosma in the review *Punct* ["Point"] (no. 2 / November 1924) is a genuine cosmopolitan creation, made of randomly associated

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words, without logic and even in several languages, in order to denounce speech automatisms and the petrifaction of the thought in a pre-established linguistic frame:

> (c'est un conte à dormir debout que il y a trois jours me télégraphia de Venise et de Philibert Le Voyer seigneur de Lignerolles et de Bellefille ma nourrice nommée la Sultane aux seins de fine ouate). inventează prohibiţiunea în nocturn cu ambalaj megaloman, scena reprezintă un om – linda dama en la cama. le binôme est un bonhomme à quatorze abonnés 3, 7, 8, 11, c, M, x, f, ut, fa, mi bémol, Londres et 100 cartes de visites. o dar pieptănul matrimonială e complect tifos. îngerul mecanic plictisit în omnibus maniac de aceea domnul meu, mylord, sênor, mein herr, monsieur, signore, bunăziua Doamnă! dispariţia mâine – mâna dreaptă în suspensie. cette négation armée d'un perroquet: hic, ubi vir non est, ut sit adulterium, circ circular circular circulară în circatrice circumcisă etc. atunci ţi-ai fost mamă cu un dinam. semnul de întrebare a fost mult mai mare la început. stinge steaua no. 8 din stalul al III-lea. eu mă elefant tu te elefanţi el se elefante (nu el e fante), aplauze în contumacie sau costum naţional şi tren mixt incognito, un tânăr belgian negru fuge răguşit. trapez la trap se accident. steamer în pantofi de lac ent haupft vers l'amérique con paraguanto. în gând tramwaye simultane. dansatori pe sârmă ghimpată imită gloanţe dum-dum. 1740 etaje la pătrat. trotuarul automat întrerupe: le crocodile mystique est téléphone PUNCT.

In his *Theory of The Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger considers that the avant-garde was not mainly a negation of the established models, genres or techniques, but a "self-criticism of art" as institution and commodity in the bourgeois society. This is how the urge that opens the first programmatic text of the Romanian avant-garde, published in 1924 in *Contimporanul*, must be understood: "Down with art! For it has prostituted itself". The total contempt of the avant-garde towards all institutionalized forms and norms is notorious – contempt, among other things, towards Art and Literature, sacred monsters that had become odious because they had been identified with Convention, that is, with the fettering of the spirit; one can even discern an irreducible opposition between poetry and literature, the former being perceived as the only authentic form of expressing being, while the latter was identified with the interested obedience to official, mummified formulas and canons. "Mistakes have always been made, but the greatest mistakes are the poems that have been written", declared Tristan Tzara in a Dadaist manifesto, suggesting, perhaps, that literary writing would mean, inevitably, adhering to certain literary canons, that is, allowing your thought to petrify in order to get the status of a *man of letters*. This is how one can explain the excommunications of those who were found guilty of having aspired to official consecration, to literary glory, a famous case being the exclusion, in 1931, of Ilarie Voronca from the group formed around the review *unu* ["one"], because, as Gheorghe Dinu pointed out in an article, he had published "the last treasure of his song" (the volume *Incantations*) "for 40 lei at a bloated and mercenary publishing house" (the "National Culture" Publishing House), an inexcusable mistake, to which were added the endeavors made by the poet to be accepted in the Society of Romanian Writers.

From such gestures, one might draw the conclusion that the Romanian avant-garde showed the same sectarian intolerance that characterized, for instance, Parisian surrealism. Unlike the latter, though, which did not allow any deviation

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from the ideological line imposed by its leader, André Breton, in an authoritarian way that resembled the dogmatism of the church, the Romanian avant-garde displayed a much more tolerant spirit, open to all innovative directions, and refractory to any restrictive ideology (therefore, that "terror of theory", which Antoine Compagnon considers, together with the intention of releasing the spirit from all dogmas, to represent one of the paradoxes of the avant-garde (Compagnon 1998: 77), cannot be said to characterize the Romanian avant-garde as well). Concentrating their efforts in the direction of the total renewal of autochthonous art, the first Romanian vanguardists rejected in principle the idea of enrolling themselves in a certain current, and accepted the most diverse, sometimes divergent, orientations. This might explain the eclecticism of the Romanian avant-garde, its wish to achieve a "modern synthesis" of all innovative directions in contemporary art, and also the spectacular changes of the artistic formula (poets like Ion Vinea, Ilarie Voronca, Stephane Roll, etc., or painters like Marcel Iancu, Mattis-Teutsch, Maxy, Victor Brauner, etc. rapidly evolved from expressionism to Dadaism, cubism, constructivism, futurism or/and surrealism, according to each one's taste and temperament, but also to the general orientation of his/her group, which was considered to be the most innovative of that time). In a manifesto entitled *We…*, published in number 100/1931 of *Contimporanul*, this eclecticism was justified by the wish to create an art in the spirit of the time, yet an original, authentic art, without pre-established formulas and recipes:

> We, who are here, wanted a free and full life and expression for everyone. From this affirmation, we reached, naturally, meanings in forms and words, which were not only ours, but also of the time and the people who have grown with us.
>
> We, therefore, did not imitate anyone, we did not syllabify or repeat anything. From the very start, names you found here sounded next to those who made abroad the first beginnings. We did not answer any call, though, we were, in Europe, among those who raised the flag.
>
> (…) We were among those who succeeded in grasping the style of an epoch and to find a voice for it.
>
> Today, we, who are here, don't want to remain anyone's prisoners, and even less the captives of our past. Revolutions are made for new institutions in politics, not in art. We proclaim ourselves in a state of permanent revolution against everything that becomes procedure, system, recipe and prattle in art: no matter the chronological order, everything, from ossified realism to the rotten surrealisms, can be enclosed under the same epitaph of helplessness and exhaustion.
>
> Only the spirit of the quest, only the welcoming of the miracle survives.

As for the surrealist group that entered the scene after 1945, its wish of subordination to the movement ruled by André Breton was paradoxically justified by the desperate attempt to keep its autonomy, and even to subsist under the conditions of the imminent setting up of the Stalinist terror. Its cosmopolitism, viewed again as a capital sin from the perspective of the new political regime, was also the main cause of its forced dissolution, in 1947 (if by then it had been accused of „artistic Bolshevism", the genuine Bolsheviks that took the power came to accuse it of bourgeois spirit). Yet, until that moment, the surrealist group had represented the last important wall of defence against totalitarianism.

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Abstract

In a famous essay published in the eighties under the title *Éloge du cosmopolitisme*, Guy Scarpetta was defining cosmopolitism the movement of rejection of any "ideological device of root-striking" that connects the individual to the collective phantasms of the tribe, the nation, the race, etc. By its challenging attitude, the avant-garde, in Scarpetta' s opinion, undermines the "device of root-striking" through its lack of piety towards origins, towards national traditions, towards the so-called "racial patrimony" or towards the "purity of language", as well as through the transgression of all frontiers (spatial, linguistic, cultural, etc.). Despite the officially preached nationalism, the Romanian avant-garde had from the very beginning the ambition of internationalization, transgressing the territorial borders, traveling and engaging in cultural exchanges with the congeneric European movements. The members of the Romanian avant-garde published also in foreign reviews or participated in artistic events (congresses, exhibitions, etc.) organized abroad, and, conversely, one may notice the presence of numerous foreign names in the Romanian avant-garde publications and in the exhibitions of modern art organized in Bucharest starting with 1928, under the patronage of the review *Contimporanul* ("The Contemporary"). Otherwise, out of a genuine obsession with uprooting, many members of the Romanian avant-garde went into voluntary exile before or soon after the war, some of them gaining international recognition as names of reference in modern art. One must notice that very few finally settled in Israel, as the vanguardists seemed to refuse that "promised land" dreamt by the Zionists, whom they had always disapproved, preferring instead more cosmopolitan adoptive countries, especially France, the cradle of the avant-garde. The same refusal of root-striking urged them, even when living in Romania, to write in French, the international language of the avant-garde, or to exile themselves in their own language, decomposing and recomposing it *ad libitum* in order to create an autonomous poetic language, genuinely international. Famous indeed have remained, for instance, the "leopard" language of Virgil Teodorescu and the "prodigious stuttering" of Gherasim Luca (as Gilles Deleuze called it).

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