# THE IDENTITY OF THE ROMANIAN PRE-AVANT-GARDE

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**Rezumat:**
În evoluţia şi dialectica fenomenului literar de la sfârşitul secolului al XIX-lea şi începutul secolului al XX-lea, se observă o perioadă de declin artistic, de confirmare a curentelor şi a mişcărilor literare, perioadă care neagă tradiţia şi care, prin intermediul unor elemente importante, vine să anunţe avangarda istorică. Ne referim aici la o serie de curente literare şi artistice ce conţin un set de trăsături similare, cu un fetiş pentru noutatea care şochează şi un suport oferit valorilor generale şi în mod normal acceptate, fără să conţină forţa de penetrare, agresivitate, coerenţă sau împrăştiere a avangardei actuale: fauvism, cubism, futurism, imagism, vorticism şi altele.
**Cuvinte cheie**:
Pre-avangardă, anti-tradiţionalism, manifest poetic, post-simbolism, program-articol, arhitext

**Abstract:**
In the evolution and dialectics of the literary phenomenon at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century we can note a period of artistic fizzle, of confirming literary currents and movements, that vehemently deny the tradition and which, through some important elements, shall announce the historical avant-garde. We are referring to a series of artistic and literary currents, with a set of similar features, having a fetish for the shocking novelty and bracketing of the established and generally accepted values, without having the force of penetration, aggressiveness, coherence and spreading of the actual avant-garde: the fauvism, cubism, futurism, imagism, vorticism and others.
**Keywords:**
Pre-avantgarde, anti-traditionalism, poetic manifest, post-symbolist, programme-article, archi-text.

At the end of the XIX century and beginning of the XX century, Europe faces sizzling literary and artistic movements that were contesting and nonconformist, with some elements of avant-garde, but without its coherence, radicalism, force of imposing and spreading area. For their



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importance, we shall mention a few currents that we prefer to call preavantgarde: fauvism, cubism, futurism, imagism, vorticism, akmeism etc.

What was happening in the Romanian literature from the modernity point of view, during this period? How isolated, as it was wrongfully considered and it is still considered today, or how connected were we to the European spirit of the moment? If we were to believe Eugen Lovinescu's opinions in "The history of the contemporary Romanian literature from 1900 to 1927" – and those were the ones to set the trend – we would have shown, due to the conservatory mentality of *semanatorism* and *poporanism*, currents of a traditional orientation, an undeniable opacity towards the first manifestations of modernism (*these currents were only an aspect of the Romanian culture and do not have a correspondent in English). The thesis of the inter-war lustrous critic, having its own validation quantum, still needs to be corrected, because, in the present, a different information and perspective is available, but also a wider and more nuanced comprehensive of the cultural field. Despite the fact that they did not have the doctrinary consistency, the influence and area of promotion of the currents that were claiming themselves to be of tradition and, although in numerous cases, the potential representatives have migrated to the West in order to confirm themselves, (the situation of Tzara and Brâncuşi) - in the end this is a way of dialogue and synchronisation among cultures – the elements of modernism and early avant-garde have registered a certain frequency.

One of the first signs, if not even the first, of the artistic renewal tendencies, of intellectual sizzle and aggitation among the young literates, is found in the pages of the few publications animated by a claiming spirit, such as "The Magazine of the Others" *(Revista Celorlalţi)* and "The Future" *(Viitorul)*. In the first number of The Magazine of the Others of May 20, 1908 a literary manifest is printed, "Light the Torches" *(Aprindeţi torţele)*, vehemently anti-traditional, signed by Ion Minulescu, in which the youth was asked to "light the torches", to promote "freedom and individuality in art" and to abandon the sclerotic forms, inherited from the predecessors: "Freedom and individuality in art, stepping aside from the formulas learnt from the elderly, the tendency towards what is new, strange, even bizzare, of not extracting anything but the characteristic parts from life, of putting away what is common (...) If the literary tradition finds it revolutionary to colour these milestones, then so be it – we will take it. However, let it never be forgotten that the crimes of which ignored writers are accused are



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conformism, imitation and blind subjection to yesterday's regulations. "And them, the young ones, shall enter with the «torches lit up, on the front door of the «temple of literature»". Yet we ought to mention that, without quoting him, the author of the article has adopted ideas from the volume of the impressionist critic Remy de Gourmont, *Le livre des Masques*, vol. I, p. 8 and p. 251[1]. Nonetheless, Ion Minulescu, the author of some comments in the publication mentioned about Arthur Rimbaud and Isidore Ducasse de Lautréamont, visionary poets, models of nonconformism in art and life, later on claimed by surrealists as lustrous predecessors, was one of the most zealous animators of the juvenile artistic environment; in his literary series, published in the journal "The Future" (*Viitorul*), where he was an editorial secretary for a few years, the writer proved his predilection and opening to modernism. Not much later, in the transient (only three issues) but nonconformist weekly magazine "The Island" (*Insula*, 1912), Ion Minulescu shall publish an article-programme, with very daring and combative assertions, directed against routing, false values, favourised imposture and "desigraceful disorientation of a young audience". The attitude of the new wave is represented by singularisation and defying the very stuck-up esthetical norms of hierarchies reknown for trying to answer another waiting horison, of those visionaries who "keep their whole enthusiasm for an unprostituted and authentic art". The incissive and provocative sintagm from the end of the passage shal be found in a more imperative ennunciation ("bash the art for prostitution!") in a constructivist manifest of Ion Vinea. And, in the end, the resolution for exiting from the official art marasm, by refusing institutionalised mass criteria of impostors and profiteers: "We are truly the islanders disgusted and revolved against the hollow and insolent fuss of the ones on the continent. We not only stay far from the shores; we even stay above waters, which have also been troubled in their natural clarity. Unknown island, we have appeared despising any literary geography, on whose maps we are not shown even as a possibility, and maybe even against its intentions. Thus we are not bound to take into consideration any of the regulations of this geography.'' The isolation of the new generation youth, of the "islanders" shall not imply, despite the contemptuous rhetorics, an abulic-superior attitude, esthetical, like the *fin de siècle*, but an active, restless one, searching for new forms of life and art.

[1] Apud Gh. Savul, *About our small decadent literary current and particularly about Ion Minulescu's poetry* (s. a.), p. 13.



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The artistic act is permanently motivated by a sensitivity, a perception and a potential new way of life. However, those would not be futile, but imposed by necessity, by the impact with the reality: "... we have split from the rest of the world because we were beginning to suffocate in that false and mercantile atmosphere. We cannot follow old paths, so often walked by the continentals that we run away from, compromised by this circumstance. We want to live, we need a new formula of life, and we shall find it".

Regarding their own poetry, or that of the group, the assertions become more vague and summarised, the justification and alibi being the special relationship with the real life, and, again, rejecting the old rules "We are not seeking a doctrine for our future activity. Doctrines come last; they are concluded by the mere way of work of each of us, and are determined by the reality conditions. We have the duty to mark an attitude: We no longer believe in the present formulas, or the possibility of their rehabilitation". But it is precisely the indevision, hesitation or delaying in elaborating and codifying literary doctrines, not to mention scriptural praxis, cantonation, almost always, midway between denying the previous discourse and affirming another, on numerous ocasions preferring to reform or remain in the stage of intentions, that are separating the preavantgarde from the avant-garde rupture. In the sense of what we have presented, it is of interest to see what discourse was Minulescu himself performing during that period before the great Dadaist explosion of 1917. We shall only briefly reffer to Minulescu's poetry, as the intention is not to comment his lyrics as a whole, but to ilustrate an exponential sequence of preavantgarde.

Even in 1908, notable year for the preavantgardist aggitation atmosphere, he publishes the volume Romances for later *Romanţe pentru mai târziu*, - the next set of lyrics "Talking to myself", *De vorbă cu mine însumi* (1913), shall maintain in the same parameters – inducing, from the title, the suggestion of a poetics, possibly even innovative, confirmed by a text that we will analyse soon, addressed to a speaker that would be more prepared to perceive the change that is suggested. This projecting into the future, a *futur proche*, certainly does not refer to any ermetical difficulty in understanding the poetic message, but to the alleged and bantered inertia of the receiver. Of course the title calls for consideration or reconsideration in the parameters of the symbolist and post-simbolist archytext, the innuendo over Varlain's volume, *Romances sans paroles*, being very obvious. A rather modern reporting, by destructuration, ironic and parodic aiming the specie,



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and even the symbolist discourse, like in the Newcomer Romance (*Romanţa noului venit*). Without being a poetic art in itself, the final part of the text includes meta and inter-textual suggestions with manifesto accents: "*So open the gate / And to my way / Come with laurel leaves, / And you, who measure by verse the thoughts that have no measure // Rush to come around me, / And in the sound of golden lyres, / Set along with me / Towards the world with castles without decks / And feudal ditches, / Without rusty copper gates, on which the newcomers knock...// Come all, while it is still time, / And you can sing - / Come !... / I shall light in your souls the fire of the extinct torches / And in your lyrics the dream and sorcery of the new magic!.. // But the gate stood close upon hearing the future art. // It was around the year one thousand nine hundred eight... I think*." The first three verses are in an intertextual dialogue, not to say a lyrical paraphrase, with some of the statements in the programme-article published in the first issue of "The Island", proving a constant attitude and an "avangardist" accordance between the theoretical programme and literary praxis: "*Fire up the torches, to enlight the present of the literature! (...) So fire the torches. Enter the temple of literature through the main gate, not the side entries. Bow to the dead people at the entry. But no more* (...)". The critic does not only target the tradition and obsolete literary clichees, "feudal ditches", "rusty copper gates", but, from the positions of an *avant la lettre* modernism, also the symbolism, although he surrounds himself with symbolist poets who collaborate with his magazines. However, it is true that his irony is subtle and cordial, and the distance is made not by polemics, but by the type of discouse performed. C. Ciopraga has very accurately understood the minulescian position to symbolism: "An antitradiţional, Minulescu still cultivates romance, with molecular changes, dilating its dimensions, embossing irony or orienting it to parody, in a spectacular prestidigitation, so that the verlainian romance, velveted and musical, loses its identity. By naming them Romances for Later, we are not to believe that the poet considered himself to be difficult; the title is a farce. Discoursive, declamative, between the author, - very popular – and symbolism, there is a gross incompatibility. The eruptive distraction cannot be compressed; the trumpets, the other brass items and the percussion instruments cover everything in a total indifference. Not the nerves, not the spleen, not the macabre, not the devitalization, not the satanism of the damned poets, hence nothing of the psychoses and the leaded colour of the decadent eastern poets



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cannot be a part of the componence of the minulescian symbolism, impregnated with pretention and burlesque"[2]**.** The minulescian dissidence of these years, against the symbolism, from which it takes its rhetoric, in order to undermine it through exaggeration and theatrisation, also reaches preIonescian notes, in the sense of the puppetry-absurd fantesy, with a notch of compassive lyrism of some texts from Elegies from Small Beings *Elegii pentru fiinţe mici*, in a poem like "Watercolour" *(Acuarelă)*. Even the title imposes a discreet ironic note to the idea of pastel, of nature painting, to which it opposes, in smoky touches, a monotonous citadin landscape, repetitive and mechanically caricatural: "In the city where it rains three times a week, /The citizens on sidewalks / Walk holding hands, / And in the city where i trains three times a week, / From beneath the old umbrellas, that sigh / And bend, / Soaking from the rain, / Citizens on sidewalks / Seem like mechanic puppets, taken from the shelves. / ( ... ) / In the city where i trains three times a week / An old man and an old woman - / Two broken toys - / Walk holding hands ..." Taking into consideration the other major component of the context, the presence and influence of the ideology and literature of traditional origin through semanatorism, poporanism, post-romantism with names such as Iorga, Coşbuc, Goga, Vlahuţă, Şt. O Iosif etc. the theoretic and poetic minulescian discourse, as well as other postsimbolist young authors', such as – we will see – even Tzara at his debute, can be labeled as regenerating, in a radical manner.

In the same year 1908, during an exhibition organised in Bucharest 12 Derain paintings could be seen[3]. The plastic chronicle dedicated to the event, published in the daily "The Age" *(Epoca)*, of the next day, noted the scandalised reactions of the conservatives and the admiring ones of the supporters of the modern taste and innovative directions. Regarding the perception of the audience, the recourse of N. D. Cocea in "The New Romanian Magazine" *(Noua Revistă Română)* is simptomatic, because it proves continuity and not just a singular opinion in favour of switching mentalities. Pleading for the unusual painting thechnique of Derain, the

[2] C. Ciopraga, *Literatura română între 1900 şi 1918*, Iasi: Editura Junimea, 1970, p. 300.

[3] André Derain, painter and engraver, who, in the first stage of his creation, was one of the representatives of fauvism, along with Vlaminck, Matisse, Van Dongen or Duffy. The novative current, affirmed at the beginning of the XX century, was suggesting a different approach of subjects by using violent colour harmonies, - the name of the current comes from the French *fauve* (wild) – of pure colour tones and the eschewal of depth perspective.



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reviewer condemns the rut of the public taste, prisoner of the "stale artistic formulas" and of "clichees" learnt and kept "from school time". Another extremely significant moment is the publishing in the Craiova magazine The Democracy'' (*Democraţia*, february 20, 1909) of the first futuristic programme of F.T.Marinetti, *Manifesto di fondazione*, in the same day with its French publication in the pages of the well-known magazine''Le Figaro''; it was later printed in Italian in the *Poesia* magazine (no.1-2, January – February, 1909). Later on, in a more elaborate and more accurate translation, "The Manifesto" *(Manifestul)* shall be printed again in "The Future" (*Viitorul*, October 25, 1909), a publication in which Ion Minulescu shall immediately adhere to the futurist contestation. This current had persisting echoes and frequent appearances, due to other Italian writers of the same orientation, translated in various magazines such as The Modern Library (*Biblioteca modernă*) where they published The Painters' Manifesto (*Manifestul pictorilor*, March 25, 1910), The Dramatic Authors' Manifesto (*Manifestul autorilor dramatici*, May 15, 1911), the blazing Technical Manifesto of the Futuristic Literature (*Manifest tehnic al literaturii futuriste*, May 1912), and The Musicians' Manifesto (*Manifestul muzicienilor*, August 1912)[4].

A truly uncommon publication, but of too short duration for making a notable influence was the monthly Fronde (*Fronda*), – only 3 issues - under a representative title, edited in Iaşi in 1912. The text manufacturers – let's name them so – were stipulating a programme "without a programme" and writings "without authors"; their articles were not signed and the editors' names were not shown even on the cover. Although no artistic manifesto is presented in the pages of the first issue, opened with an unsigned poem named An Analists' Psalms *(Psalmii unui analist)*, in an article called Frondations (*Frondări*), a paragraph underlines the role of the "young forces", mentioning "two valuable names: Tudor Arghezi and Gala Galaction". In another text, The Sacred, *(Sacra)*, they present the admiration for the work of I. L. Caragiale, a writer that was highly consummed by the postmodernists of the 80's, being basically simptomatic for the options of the youth, from the perspective of the denial that it opposed to the caragialian speech of inertial forms of thinking and language: "At the altar of the youth we have knelt down shivering, and our eyes, who have not yet

[4] Geo Şerban, «Préludes à l'avant-garde chez les roumaines», in: *Euresis. Cahiers roumains d'études littéraires*, nr. 1-2, 1994, pp. 11 - 24.



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seen life unless through the pink dust of the wind, have cried bitter tears, dedicated to you, father..."[5]

It is also worthy to note that of all the years of the beginning of XX century, as a reaction to the rationalising tendencies of cubism, also dates the increasing interest of Brâncuşi for the simplified and essentialised forms of the African and Polynesian primitive art, visible in his sculptures The Kiss *(Sărutul)* (first version, 1907), The Sleep *(Somnul)* (1908), Sleeping Muse *(Muză dormind)* (1909 – 1910), The Amazing *(Măiastra)* (1910), Prometheus *(Prometeu)* (1911), Madame Pogany *(Domişoara Pogany)* (1912) and The First Step *(Primul pas)* (1913). In 1913 he holds an exhibition in the United States, participating to *New York Amory Show*, registering his first success and thus opening his royal path of glory. Even so, one of his friends during that time, along with Modigliani, the modern "naive" Henri Rousseau defined his style extremely well, saying that he "converted the old art into a modern idiom". Purposedly, in România he participates to exhibitions organised by "The Contemporary" (*Contimporanul*), The Artistic Youth *(Tinerimea artistică)* or "The Romanian Art" *(Arta Română)*, and in his workshop in Bucharest he keeps a series of young artists, such as Miliţa Petraşcu (most known of them), Irina Codreanu, George Teodorescu, Isami Noguci, Constantin Antonovici. In such a cultural landscape, not at all "figé", not at all limited only to sămănătorism, poporanism and late reflexes of symbolism, as it was thought for a while, the magazine "The Symbol" *(Simbolul)*, better known for literary history than others of the same period, edited by the very young Sami Samyro (Samuel Rosenstock) - future Tristan Tzara - and Ion Iovanaki (future Ion Vinea), the soon-to-be avant-gardists, almost seems like a demure or timid modernist publication. Marcel Iancu was also a part of the group of young collaborators and whom, along with Tristan Tzara, at the end of 1916, at the "Voltaire Cabaret" (*Cabaretul Voltaire*) in Zurich, will be among the founders of the most radical avant-garde current, the dadaism. Still with the help of Ion Vinea, Tzara will manage the magazine "The Calling" (*Chemarea*, October 1915), where, before leaving for Switzerland, he will publish certain poems from a more numerous group, that were written between 1913 – 1915, distancing from the symbolist poetics by prosaic images and the absence of melody, thus prefiguring the nonconformism of the future years. They are very important, even more so

[5] *Fronda*, nr. 3, iunie, an I, 1912.



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because the author never denied his Romanian texts even later, in full literary glory, considering them an integrative part of his poetical work. Also, another Romanian friend of his, the surrealist poet Saşa Pană, will print in his own publishing house, "One" *(Unu)*, these poems of the youth, under Tristan Tzara's agreement, re-edited along with a few unusual ones at the Romanian Book Printing House *Cartea Românească* in 1971. Here is one of them, dated 1913, Mangalia:

''*The fishermen are returning with the stars of the waters*
*the emperors go out in parks at this hour resembling*
*the age of the engravings*
*and the servants are bathing the hunting dogs*
*the light is putting gloves on*
*open window – hence,*
*you go out of the room at night like the seed comes out of the peach*
*like the priest out of the church,*
*God: scratches the wool of the subjects in love,*
*paints the birds with ink, renews security on the moon.*
*- come to the rill*
*to make a clay pot*
*- come to the well so I can kiss you*
*- come to the village park*
*until the rooster sings*
*that the hay stings, and you hear the cows ruminating*
*that the town is scandalised*
*or in the stable attic we would sleep*
*then they miss the calves*
*- let's leave, let's leave.*''

Of course that, within some of the poems created during these years, one can also feel the symbolist influence, such as in "The Side of the City" *(La marginea oraşului)*, dated 1913, reminding of Arthur Rimbaud's *Le dormeur du val*, "Sunday" *(Dumineca)* (1914) or "Cousin, Boarding-School Girl" *(Verişoara, fată de pension)*, published in "The New Romanian Magazine" *(Noua revistă română)*, no.11, of 21-28 June 1915. The symbolist echoes do not affect the incipient but visible change of poetics and language from this stage, that will truly explode in the Dadaist revolution. It is interesting that his friend, sharing the same ideas and



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programme, Ion Vinea, announces through his lyrical discourse, from the beginning, beyond the reflexes of symbolism, the change of conception and discourse practice in regard to the poetry of the time. A speech with a broad casualness of treating the poetical image, sometimes ironically-prosaic and of exact, concrete meaning, somehow in the manner of those "pfanopoeia" theorised by Ezra Pound as related to vorticism[6], and other times with a remarkable freedom of association of terms. Illustrative for, let's say, for now, the modernism of the young Vinea, are those poems such as *Tuzla* or "A Yawn at Dawn" *(Un căscat în amurg)*[7]. Ion Pop places it within the prose poems that "set under an obviously anti-romantic and anti-symbolist title" the construction of poetical image of a defiant realism:

*''The forest, angry as a herd of horses, went quiet; its paunch, the valley*
*matte and round, in the hoarfrost of hills: naked woman between soft pillows.*
*Supernatural hen, in the evening it closes wings of clouds over the eggs*
*of the village, - and on a knoll in the back God played backgammon*
*and dropped the Gârceni, dices with a round glass.*
*... For over a week now, no postman has blown his horn, on horseback*
*but a black-priest rides with his feet on the road and the distance moos and sits down on a herd of cows*
*here is the wind burdening itself with bells inherited from father to son look... ''*

One could even say that a construction of a verse of the type "Supernatural hen, in the evening it closes wings of clouds over the eggs" anticipates, through the images collage and the semantic ruptures, elements of surrealism.

A precise and significand catagraphy of the preavantgarde beginning of these authors is made by Dan Grigorescu:

[6] Modernist literary current, derived from imagism, without wide echoes, manifested before the First World War, and whose main principle was the cultivation of strong, dynamic image, like a vortex.
[7] Not published in the volume, the poem appeared in "The Chronicle", (*Cronica*), I, August 16, 1915.



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"*The poems published by Tzara, Vinea and Adrian Maniu in 1914 and 1915 in "The New Romanian Magazine" (Noua Revistă Română), edited by Ion Vinea, demonstrate the endeavour to separate from the formulas of post-symbolist prosody and literary concepts. As frequentely suggested by exegetes of the Romanian avant-garde movement, this seems to show that the Zurich insurrection of Tzara and Iancu was under preparation whilst the two friends were stil living in Romania, whose literature and art were characterized by a quest for renewal, the lucid aspiration for the assertation of a new sensitivity, of a novel concept of the artist's relations with the universe*"[8].

A true genius precursor, along with Jarry, of the European avant-garde, namely of a direction of the latter, the absurd, was Dem. Demetrescu-Buzău, known in literature under the pseudonym Urmuz (1883 – 1928). Thos is the author of proses such as, Algazy and Grummer, Ismail and Turnavitu, "The Funnel and Stamate" (Pâlnia şi Stamate), Cotadi and Dragomir, "Reviewers" (Cronicari), "After the Storm" (După furtună), Emil Gayk, "Going Abroad" (Plecarea în străinătate), "A little metaphysics and astronomy" (Puţină metafizică şi astronomie), in which the clichés of traditional rhetorics of the realist mimesis are discredited, by undermining not only the narrative signigicant, but also of the significand, meaning that of a textual activity remained halfway in transforming scriptural practice. Read to some groups of friends, his short stories have been mostly published after the author's death. The only antume proses are Algazy and Grummer and "The Funnel and Stamate" published in Tudor Arghezi's magazine, "Romanian Thought" (Cuget românesc). Very appreciated by the Romanian surrealist writers, his influence, strictly regarding the current, was one of atmosphere and, possibly, a catalyser. The great merit of the so reduced Urmuz writings is the anticipation of the literature of absurd, on European level, as the most undeniable of his exegets, Nicolae Balotă[9], reknown by foreign literary and historic critics, has proven.

In conclusion, the literary and cultural field of the beginning of the XX century Romania, along with the traditionalist component, was also open towards the European modernism in the shape of pre-avantgarde, having at least two graet names, Brâncuşi and Urmuz.

[8] Dan Grigorescu, *A Militant Art*, *Romanian Review*, nr. 1 / 1993, p. 23.
[9] Nicolae Balotă, *Urmuz*, Cluj, Editura Dacia, 1970; ediţia a II-a, revăzută şi adăugită, Timişoara, Editura Hestia, 1997.



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