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The Romanian Avant-gardes. Eastern Modernity with (a) Western Touch(es)

dr. Ana-Maria Stan*,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract: *The present study aims to discuss the role and place of the leading literary figures of the Romanian avant-garde within the great debate which dominated interwar Romania – that of **tradition** versus **modernity/modernization**, as well as some of the intricate relationships established between the Romanian avant-garde artists and their Western counterparts. Although placed at the geographical and cultural periphery of Europe, the Romanians were key actors in one of the most important trends of modernity from the first half of the XXth century – the avant-garde –. The way they (re)acted to the literary, artistic and political ideas invented, supported or discussed by the European avant-garde is a proof that the multifaceted dialogue generated by this cultural movement dissolved imaginary and practical boundaries and overcame many of the discrepancies and differentiations still present between the East and the West. Romanians were not only exporting avant-garde artists to the Western scene (Tzara, Fondane), but were also assimilating the latest avant-garde ideas into innovative literary and artistic trends within their own national cultural framework (see for example the emergence of Integralism). Consequently, the avant-garde artists were constantly challenging wider audiences to react to their concepts and beliefs, having a significant role in the modernization of mentalities. By taking into account the literary manifests and the personal contacts they established with Western avant-garde personalities, we intend to bring a new perspective to the East versus West debate.*

Key words: Eastern European avant-garde, cultural topoi, tradition, aesthetic modernity, socio-political modernization

„Genuine art is the highest form of freedom” Wagner

I. Argument:

Trying to address the topic of the avant-garde[s] is always a challenging endeavor, as this brings out a lot of methodological and factual questions.

Looking to analyze the main characteristics of the Romanian literary avant-garde in its classical period of manifestation - roughly situated between 1907-1947/48 [Mincu 2006, 57] - , we adopt the succinct and all encompassing description recently given by Mike Sell:

“An avant-garde is a minority formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal, or alternative ways; in particular, by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies, and/or legitimacy of cultural institutions” [Sell, 2010, 770].

However, the avant-garde’s influence is not limited to the cultural sphere, but also greatly involved in the sociopolitical one. Indeed, another specific attribute of this movement is that its representatives strived to “expand the limits of the Work of Art, so as to act on the society at large” [Todorov 2007, 53], challenging not only aesthetic values and canons, but also mentalities.

Using these two theoretical concepts as framework, this research will examine the place and impact of the Romanian literary avant-garde within the larger frame of the Romanian interwar society and discuss its contribution to the cultural and political modernization of the country. Besides, we will concentrate on the complex issue of East-West dialogue, which manifested itself in the manifests and the creations of the Romanian avant-garde artists, as well as in the exchanges which they established with their European counterparts.

Although this is just a limited analysis, part of a larger research project, several interesting remarks can already be sketched and offer arguments for the inclusion of the Romanian’s avant-garde voice in the great discussion whether the West should or not provide *the* model of choice for the Eastern part of the continent.

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II. Background scene of the Romanian avant-garde groups

At first glance, at the onset of the XX-th century, Romania was an unlikely place for a vigorous manifestation of the avant-garde. Indeed, while the 1909 *Manifesto del futurismo* appeared in several Romanian newspapers as almost the same time as in Western Europe [both in the Old Kingdom – see the journal *Democrația* of Craiova – and in Transylvania – in the journal *Țara noastră*] neither the process of state centralization was completely achieved, nor the cultural life had reached its full potential. This was a reality acknowledged by the Romanian publishers of Marinetti's programmatic text, who commented that in Romania there were no libraries to burn down and no museums to flood and destroy [apud Morar, 2005, 38], meaning there wasn't a solid enough institutional tradition to dispute; hence, such a radical stance was out of the question in the local context, at least for a while.

Indeed, one would have to wait well into the third decade, to witness the appearance of distinct avant-garde groups and publications in Romania. By 1924, when the first avant-garde manifesto appeared – the famous *Activist manifesto for the youth* – the sociopolitical circumstances, as well as the cultural ones, had dramatically altered. Indeed, Romania had become one of the biggest Eastern-European countries – 296.000 km², over 16 millions inhabitants out of which around 30% had a non Romanian-ethnic background – Jews representing 5,3% – [Hitchins 2003, 331]. A new constitution, adopted in March 1923, aimed to provide a most democratic framework for integrating the newly acquired provinces – Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia – into a unitary and national state. In cultural terms, the interwar years were mostly dedicated to finding the best possible answer to the question of *Romanianness* and of defining whether Romania belonged more to the West or to the East, of discovering the appropriate patterns of future development. The mixed heredity of Romanians, which stand at a geographical, as well as cultural crossroad – Paris, Moscow, Istanbul, and Vienna often appearing as references in political, literary, philosophical, artistic or academic discourse – gave birth to complex and often contradictory concepts and imaginary topoi and brought forward many interesting solutions to the key issue of identity [Spiridon 2012, 1-2].

If we look at the avant-garde groups considering all these factors we could shed a new light into their activities and attempt an answer to the delicate question of how these poets and writers situated themselves in the great *Romanianness* debate.

It is a well known fact that most of the avant-garde artists of Romania were ethnic Jews – from Marcel Iancu to Ilarie Voronca (Eduard Marcus), from Sașa Pană (Alex. Binder) to Gherasim Luca, or Victor Brauner and Tristan Tzara (Samuel Rosenstock) [Crohălniceanu 2001, 34-39]. This particular biographical status had a powerful influence on their attitudes, as they were torn between several dimensions. As minority citizens of a national state who was undergoing its final building process, they had to carve a niche and impose themselves as artists within Romania's boundaries and inside its given cultural/literary fields. As Jews, they were inherently attracted to the larger ethnic community to which they belonged. Add to this piece of information the characteristics of the avant-garde movements – which praised the «globalized», borderless world gradually being created by the development of science and technique and, later, by the totalitarian ideologies such as communism – , as well as the appeal of Paris as one of the prominent cultural cradles of modern Europe; and one could explain not only their frequent peregrinations between East and West, but also account for their effort to challenge and refresh the aesthetic forms and values and transform mentalities.

Alongside the strongest components of the Romanian avant-garde movement, which are a programmatic intention of renewing the art and literature from a predominant Western [meaning Francophone] perspective and internationalism – in its many social, cultural and political dimensions, one comes across constant mentions to tradition, folklore or places which haunted the collective imaginary of the Romanian people. A convincing sense of historicity could also be documented in various texts. Consequently, integration and contestation coexist in the manifestos and the poetic creations of the Romanian avant-garde groups and form the two axis which shape their public presence, providing specificity.

III. East and/or West – models to contest or adopt? The ongoing questioning of the Romanian avant-garde...

In the *Activist manifesto for the youth* (1924) [Mincu, 2006, 511] – the starting point of the autochthon literary avant-garde movement – , these traits are already clearly visible, awaiting further development. While the core of the text emphasizes the need of transforming the previous artistic activities (poetry, theater, painting, music) considered outdated and morally degraded – “*Down with the Art, as it has made a prostitute of itself!*” – the issues of Romania's identity and future are also strongly present.

Tradition is acknowledged, its contrasting connotations being fully taken into account. There are two references to Byzantium, one of the most powerful moulds of the Romanian character, archetype of the Eastern heritage of the Romanian culture. In the first case, the meaning is clearly a positive, admiring one, providing motivation and a quality standard for the mission of the new artistic generation:

„We want to tear down individualism as a goal, in order to achieve an **integral art** [our emphasis], trademark of great eras (Hellenism, Roman, Gothic, Byzantine, etc.) and we want to simplify the procedures until we reach the economy of primitive forms (all the folkloric arts, the pottery and the Romanian traditional weaving). ”

Placed in such an enumeration, Byzantine art is subsequently on equal footing with other cultural models, which have shaped both the Western and the Eastern world at its historical origins, and embodies a predominantly Eastern tradition of which the avant-garde artists feel proud of, even if they want to destroy and prevail over it with their own future creations.

However, if the Byzantine model, in its cultural dimension, holds unquestionably an honorable place in the mental and symbolic universe of the Romanian avant-garde, it is not longer the case in political and social terms. The second reference to Byzantium which appears in the *Activist manifesto for the youth* alludes to this very idea, as it is a very negative, condemning one:

„Romania is building itself today. In spite of haggard political parties, enter into the great industrial activist phase. Our towns, our roads, the bridges, the factories that will be constructed, the spirit, the rhythm and the style that will result from them cannot be falsified by **Byzantinism, Ludovicism** [allusion to the reign of King Louis XIV of France and the mentalities and social practices that it created – our note, our emphasis], *overcame by anachronisms. Let's eradicate, through the force of our disgust, the ghosts that shiver because of the light. Let's kill our own dead!*”

Here, Byzantium is seen as the place or more precisely the public system which epitomizes corruption, moral and political degradation, unfair social and economic practices, a specific mentality where everything can be bought or sold, according to private interests, not to the ones of the community. According to the Romanian avant-garde, such tainted methods and attitudes cannot possibly serve as a model for further public development. Interestingly enough, these artists do not hesitate to search and find a Western correspondent to it – namely the reign of the French Louis XIV – which they criticize and denounce with equal force.

By referring to the East and the West in this form, the Romanian avant-garde defines from its onset a specific stance in the issue of Romania's future, that aims towards a sort of a third way, an alternative which does neither indiscriminately imitates or adopts Western models, nor completely eliminates Eastern ones.

A similar complex position of the Romanian avant-garde emerges when one investigates the way in which they relate exclusively to the literary field. Looking once again at the first quoted fragment of the *Activist manifesto for the youth*, we must remark the positive mention of the folklore and its aesthetic products – an indication that the avant-garde groups which started to form in the early 1930's not only appreciated a type of tradition situated at the foundation of the Romanian specificity, but also expected, perhaps at a subconscious level, to reach the same artistic notoriety that the popular, anonymous art had gained in the Romanian common imaginary. While folklore gained *droit de cité*, other literary issues or personalities were subjected to a more nuanced analysis. Another programmatic text dated also in 1924 – *Grammar* – signed by Ilarie Voronca [Mincu 2006, 517-518], dedicated a significant part to a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western languages, while discussing the most appropriate means for the progress and renewal of the Romanian language.

Voronca did not plead in favor of developing the language by translating, implementing or adapting terms from the Western world – a method which had been widely used by the previous generations of Romanian authors as well as most of the intellectual elite – , but insisted on maintaining the national specificities. He argued that a word which designates a similar notion has in fact different meanings in different countries, due to the social and regional background realities, and that words are not meant to be translated:

„*Chemin* suggests an entirely different thing than *drum* or *cammino*, as our road is completely different than the one in Italy, and the later does not resemble the one in France. Above the style and the notion of an expression stand the style and the expression of an era or of a region. Each word in itself designates, and that fact is more precious than its intrinsic meaning, the sensibility and the sonority of the times. [...] A poem where the first verse is *Fumatul e interzis* and the second one *Rauchen verboten*, does not mean duplication, but two distinct verses. [...] *The cry of Heliade Radulescu** - Write my fellows, only write! should be reformulated, by incorporating in it the realities of these times – Make grammar mistakes! ”.

The solution which Voronca proposes for the development and upgrading of the Romanian language is to keep writing your own national language, but abolish grammatical rules – in typical avant-garde fashion - , thus making possible an evolution from the inside out, based on the local level of linguistic, and subsequently, cultural development. Voronca's belief that the Romanian was capable to undergo such a process, illustrates not only the ongoing East versus West debate, but, in our opinion, brings forth another aspect of the Romanian avant-garde stance on modernity – Western aesthetic ideas should be applied in the East with discrimination and care, by adapting them to the local context, thus providing perennial value to the results.

* Ion Heliade Radulescu (1802-1872) – XIX century Romanian poet and politician who was a fervent militant for the modernization of the Romanian language based on its originally Latin character, pleading, amongst others, for the introduction of the Latin phonetic alphabet in writing.

These are just a few examples of how the Romanian avant-garde related and coped with the demands of their socio-political and aesthetic environments. The process will continue throughout the 1930's, when a second generation of authors will provide more complex answers, arriving even to contest the international Western masters of the avant-garde movement – in manifestos and press articles - and endeavoring to create new artistic works meant to outdo the trend-setters which were Tzara, Breton or Marinetti. (these ideas will be developed in the oral communication).

Concluding remarks:

Looking at the avant-garde manifests and publications as texts which document a historical stage of development of the Romanian society in its largest sense, as well as a specific aesthetic and literary period, enables us to reconsider the importance of this movement and of its representatives and offers arguments for a more adequate positioning of these authors within the artistic and intellectual generations which dominated the interwar years in Eastern Europe. Avant-garde groups helped to shape the world of the XX-th century, by promoting East/ West dialogue and expressed themselves as artists, as well as informed citizens.

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Ana-Maria Stan holds a PhD in history and currently works as a researcher at the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania. She is in charge of the Babes-Bolyai University Historical Museum. A specialist of cultural and academic history, she has published extensively on French-Romanian cooperation and cultural exchanges in the interwar period. At the moment, she is developing a postdoctoral research project dedicated to the Romanian avant-garde that focuses on the interferences between literature and politics (1909-1949).