

# **Absurd Romania: Revisiting Tristan Tzara and Eugène Ionesco**

Adela Beiu-Papanastasiou

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

University of East Anglia  
The Department of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

Ghent University  
Department of Literary Studies

February 2017

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognize that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived there from must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

### **Absurd Romania: Revisiting Tristan Tzara and Eugène Ionesco**

**Abstract:** “Absurd Romania” revisits Romanian history and politics, and their intersection with the literary scene out of which both Tzara and Ionesco emerged, in order to better situate the diverse roots of European modernism and transnational avant-garde. I examine how their radical aesthetics developed in response to the specific political issues and cultural debates, which animated and inspired Tzara, Ionesco and their contemporaries. In the first chapter, I show that the writings of literary critic Titu Maiorescu and playwright I.L. Caragiale, two important exponents of a specifically Romanian ironic mode of cultural criticism, are highly relevant for an understanding of Tzara’s and Ionesco’s aesthetics. By revealing the points of contact between Ionesco’s cryptic forms and Caragiale’s seemingly more traditional dramaturgy, Chapter Two showcases the important aesthetic mutation at work in the theatre of the absurd. In Chapter Three, I document Tzara’s affiliation to a Romanian tradition of left-wing radicalism and engaged symbolism. The final chapter demonstrates that Ionesco’s theatre dramatizes a problematic Romanian modernity fraught with identity/cultural anxieties and political extremism. Ionesco’s aesthetics is both a continuation of the avant-garde project towards a critique of the ideology of language and a formal resolution of Romania’s identity qualms. Tzara and Ionesco’s forms, I argue, have deep roots in a Romanian tradition of social criticism which makes surprising use of irony in order to articulate conflicting visions of the nation.

## **List of Contents**

### **Chapter One**

**Introduction: Absurd Romania or “How Can One Be Romanian?”** 1

### **Chapter Two**

**The Nation and the Absurd: A Romanian Story of Modernity** 41

### **Chapter Three**

**An Absurd Rendezvous: Ionesco, Caragiale, Tzara** 74

### **Chapter Four**

**Avant-Dada: Tristan Tzara and the Romanian Modernist Left** 112

### **Chapter Five**

**The Romanian Eugen Ionesco: Dramatizing the Nation in *Nu* and *The Bald Soprano*** 153

**Conclusion: Identity Neurosis, Irony and Modernity** 191

**Bibliography** 204

## List of Illustrations

<b>Figure 1</b>	Eugène Ionesco, <i>Littérature Roumaine</i> , illustrations de l'auteur, Fata Morgana 1998	<b>81</b>
<b>Figure 2</b>	<i>Claponul</i> , no. 1 (1877), front cover	<b>93</b>
<b>Figure 3</b>	<i>Claponul</i> , no. 1 (1877), back cover	<b>94</b>
<b>Figure 4</b>	<i>Simbolul</i> , no. 1, (25 October 1912), cover page	<b>116</b>
<b>Figure 5</b>	<i>Viața Socială</i> , no. 11-12 (December 1910)	<b>125</b>
<b>Figure 6</b>	<i>Facla</i> , no. 41 (18 October 1912)	<b>136</b>
<b>Figure 7</b>	<i>Chemarea</i> , 4 October 1915	<b>146</b>
<b>Figure 8</b>	Eugène Ionesco, <i>Nu</i> (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), facsimile 1	<b>175</b>
<b>Figure 9</b>	Eugène Ionesco, <i>Nu</i> , facsimile 2	<b>176</b>
<b>Figure 10</b>	Eugène Ionesco, <i>Nu</i> , facsimile 3	<b>184</b>

## **Acknowledgements**

A version of Chapter Two of this thesis has appeared in *Modernism/modernity*, 21.4 (November 2014) as “The Nation and the Absurd. A Romanian Story of Modernity”. Many thanks to Nick Walterman, who managed the publication process. I am particularly grateful to my primary supervisor Lyndsey Stonebridge for her generous support and insightful advice. Marius Hentea and Pierre Schoentjes, who supervised my research at Ghent University, have also been incredibly committed to this project, and deserve my deepest gratitude.

## Chapter 1:

### Introduction: Absurd Romania or “How Can One Be Romanian?”

How strange and how ironic if it should be that France owed the germination of its most portentous literary currents – Dada/Surrealism and the theater of the Absurd – to the grotesqueries of a simple, unpretentious Romanian court clerk, who promptly committed suicide in 1923 when his first prose pieces were published!<sup>1</sup>

Michael Impey muses here on the posthumous legacy of the Romanian writer Urmuz (pen name of Demetru Dem. Demetrescu-Buzău). Alongside Romanian playwright I.L. Caragiale, Urmuz is an acknowledged precursor of Tristan Tzara and Eugène Ionesco, two of the most important names of the European avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Impey was right to launch this proposition provocatively because while Ionesco and Tzara were comfortably assimilated in the French and modernist canons, very little is known about the Romanian modernism they emerged from. The fact that they left Romania before they produced their most acclaimed work, means that continuities otherwise obvious were disrupted and that gestating concerns and connections did not materialize until later, when abroad, and were thus obfuscated. Their transnational careers and the subsequent (linguistic as well as cultural) “translation” into cosmopolitan French created an inhospitable distance between cosmopolitan form and Romanian context (content), which compounded the inherent abstruseness of their avant-garde aesthetics.

Two emblematic figures of the European avant-garde, Tzara and Ionesco, spent their formative years in Romania. Tristan Tzara, the literary pseudonym of Samuel Rosenstock,

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Impey, “Before and After Tzara: Romanian Contributions to Dada” in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe, and Japan*, ed. by Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), pp. 126-36 (pp.131-2).

<sup>2</sup> Urmuz’s short pieces were a source of inspiration for Tzara, Ionesco, and almost all other Romanian avant-gardists. See Impey and Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* (London: MIT, 2006), pp. 219-21); and *Pagini Bizare/Bizarre Pages in The Complete Works of Urmuz* (London: Atlas, 2006).

was born in 1896 in the provincial town of Moinesti, Romania. When Tzara left Romania, at the age of 19, he was already a name in the literary circles of Bucharest. After having been briefly but very actively involved with two literary magazines, *Simbolul* [The Symbol] (1912) and *Chemarea* [The Calling] (1915), where he published his first neo-symbolist poetry, Tzara left for Zurich to join his friends Marcel and Jules Janco. He there founded Cabaret Voltaire with Hugo Ball, became the “manager” and writer of manifestos for the Dada movement and the rest of the story – Dada in Paris, Surrealism, and a life-long career in France – is already part of modernist history. Once in Zurich he never wrote in Romanian again, although his early pieces continued to be published in Romanian publications and later in the volume *Primele Poeme* [The First Poems] (1934).

Eugène Ionesco’s maternal origins were French and Jewish but was born and lived for the most part in Romania, his father’s country, until 1942. Upon departure, at the age of 33, he left behind a career of writer and literary critic and two books. His volume of literary criticism, *Nu* [No] – an attack on Romanian literary institutions – received the prize for young writers in 1934.<sup>3</sup> About his Romanian times, Ionesco reminisced: “I had behind me a proper literary career: tens and tens of articles published in Romanian periodicals, a small collection of poems which were not good, and most notably, a book, *Nu*, in which I was trying to blow up literary criticism. I wanted to reiterate a similar experience by blowing up theatre.”<sup>4</sup> Before his departure to Paris, he had also drafted *Englezește Fără Profesor* [English without Teacher], the first version – in Romanian – of *The Bald Soprano*. His career in France started in 1950, the year when *The Bald Soprano*, his first play in French, was staged.

What are the Romanian sources of Tzara’s and Ionesco’s innovative aesthetics? This thesis proposes a historical reading of Tristan Tzara’s and Eugène Ionesco’s forms through a

---

<sup>3</sup> The prize was initiated that same year by the Minister of Public Education Dimitrie Gusti and was awarded through the Foundation for Literature and Arts “King Carol II”. See Eugène Ionesco, *Nu*, (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), p. 284.

<sup>4</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Sub Semnul Întrebării* [Under Question Mark] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), p. 173, my translation of original text given below. Unless otherwise indicated all translations in this thesis are mine and will be accompanied by original texts included in footnotes.

Aveam, de altfel, în urma mea un întreg trecut literar: zeci și zeci de articole publicate în periodicele românești, o mică culegere de poeme care nu erau bune și, mai ales, o carte, *Nu*, în care încercam să arunc în aer critica. Voiam să repet o experiență similară aruncând în aer teatrul.

revisitation of their early Romanian works and giving particular attention to the peculiarities of Romanian modernity, the cultural politics of the modern nation-state, and the strong connection between national identity and aesthetics. The complicated narrative of Romanian modernity and its identity anxieties – what I have called as a working pun *Absurd Romania* – are insufficiently acknowledged, yet major concerns of Romanian modernism, which informed their aesthetic projects.<sup>5</sup> I will consider, on the one hand, Romania’s experience of modernity, specifically as it transitioned to the status of independent nation-state, and, on the other hand, the literary and critical engagements with questions of national identity. In order to retrace the aesthetic, national and political considerations which informed Tzara’s and Ionesco’s forms, I look beyond their immediate circumstances and early artistic output to the larger context of Romanian cultural politics and their affiliation to a Romanian tradition of cultural critique.

Before 1866, the Romanian provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia were Ottoman domains. Because of their access to the Black Sea and the Danube, and their strategic position at the crossroad of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Tsarist Empires, the borders and political status of the Danubian principalities were continually disputed by powerful neighbours. As the Ottoman Empire in decline was losing its sway in the area, Russia and Western Europe started contending their interests for its former possessions. After a Russian interregnum between 1829 and 1834, Wallachia and Moldavia united as Romania in 1859 with support from Napoleon III who hoped to deter Russian authority in the region. In 1866, the German prince Karl von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was invited to rule and safeguard the precarious integrity of the new state. Romania received international recognition only in 1881, three years after it defeated the Ottoman Empire in the Battle of Plevna, with Russian support.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković have chosen a similar title for their extensive critical collection on the Yugoslavian avant-garde to suggest the political and cultural fragility and contentiousness of the space, which Romania shares to a certain extent by virtue of their common Balkan legacy. See *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant Garde and Post-Avant-Gardes, 1918-1991* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Gallagher, *Theft of a Nation : Romania since Communism* (London: C. Hurst, 2005), pp. 21-23; Mihaela Boatca, “Define and Rule: The Role of Orientalism in (Re)Colonising Eastern Europe”, in *Islam and the Orientalist World-System*, ed. by Khaldoun Samman and Mazhar Al-Zo’By (London: Routledge, 2016 [2008]), pp. 187-201 (p. 189); and Lucian Boia, *Romania: Borderland of Europe*, trans. by Christian Brown (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 82.



Romania developed an extremely eclectic culture by virtue of its multicultural Ottoman legacy and diversity of influences. Tom Sandqvist describes it as “a conglomerate of influences coming from all four points of the compass”.<sup>7</sup> By dint of geographical proximity Russia had always exerted influence in Moldavia, which it repeatedly occupied as retaliation against the Ottoman Empire. One of the most important legacies of the Tsarist Empire was the implementation during its protectorate (1829-1834), of the first constitution of the Danubian provinces, the so-called Organic Statutes (1831-32).<sup>8</sup> Transylvania was part of the Habsburg Empire until 1918 and therefore open to its cultural influences. German influences accrued in Romania both via Transylvania and due to the presence of the German king.

Yet, apart from the taxing political demands of Romania’s powerful neighbours and, in fact, in order to counter them, the cultural and political affinities with France had a special place in the Romanian psyche. Romania’s identity was “imagined”, from the first stirrings of the national emancipation movement, by local elites educated in Paris and under the sway of the republican ideology of Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet. The first generation of Romanian political leaders showed their admiration for France by attempting to recreate it in the guise of a voluntary colony, as its first prime minister put it.<sup>9</sup> Their reasons were both diplomatic and emotional. Allegiance to France ensured a tactical cultural and political alliance which consolidated the country’s position and identity against internal and external threats. By looking towards France, the elites were also attempting a cultural shift from the “backwardness” and hybridity of the Ottoman Empire to the civilization, modernity and cultural homogeneity of a Francophone independent state.<sup>10</sup>

The Great War brought new territories and further challenges to the national project. In 1918, Romania took over Transylvania from Hungary, Bukovina from Austria and Bessarabia from Russia, thus doubling in size. But the new provinces of Greater Romania were ethnically and religiously diverse and the Romanian majority fragile. Transylvania’s

---

<sup>7</sup> Sandqvist, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Gallagher, p. 21

<sup>9</sup> See Angela Jianu, *A Circle of Friends: Romanian Revolutionaries and Political Exile, 1840-1859* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 7-13, and Ion C. Bratianu, “Memoriu Asupra Romanilor Dat Imparatului Napoleon AL III-lea” in *Din Scrierile si Cuvantarile lui Ion C. Bratianu: Lupta pentru Redesteptarea nationala* (Iasi: Moldova, 2002), pp. 152-58.

<sup>10</sup>Gallagher, pp. 21-23

large Hungarian minority and the smaller German, Ukrainian and Russian minorities in the new provinces amounted to almost a third of Greater Romania's population.<sup>11</sup> Exhilarated by this achievement yet anxious about its tenability, the nationalist factions, partly backed by state-sponsored policies, became radicalized and scapegoated the sizable Romanian Jewish minority in the Iron Guard's unprecedented wave of anti-semitism. This was reflected, as we will see, in the heated and often violent cultural and aesthetic debates between cosmopolitan modernists, a large proportion of whom were Jewish, and nationalist groups with an anti-Semitic agenda. State policies and mainstream cultural discourse tried to smooth out and repress the inconsistencies of the national project and its cultural and ethnical diversity, which were believed to threaten the unity of the state.

Romanian modernism has been discussed among Balkan modernisms with which it shared political instability, multiculturalism, polyvocality, the status of minor culture and the stigma attributed to the Balkans as the irrational other of the "civilized West". Multiculturalism and polyvocality constitute the focus of Tom Sandqvist's recent comprehensive study of Romanian Dada, which led Sanja Bahun to conclude that "the most distinctive characteristic of the Romanian cultural space of the first half of the twentieth century was its heteroglossia", and look for the roots of a Romanian avant-garde in this polyvocality.<sup>12</sup> I complicate this assessment by looking more deeply into the role that France played in the Romanian cultural imaginary and the identity and artistic anxieties that it created. Special attention is warranted by Romanian modernists' concern with French influences and by Tzara's and Ionesco's choice of their adoptive culture. Balkanism – the stigma attached by Western discourse to the threatening "otherness" of the former Ottoman subjects – was aggravated by Francophone dispositions which inflected a special form of internal orientalism.<sup>13</sup> Caragiale's plays, which inspired Ionesco, ridiculed Romanian polyvocality or rather the linguistic and ideological clashes between different cultural legacies by humorously overplaying the massive impact of the French language on modern Romanian as well as the mass consumption of French liberal ideology by *nouveau* Romanian

---

<sup>11</sup> See Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Sanja Bahun, "The Balkans Uncovered: Toward *Histoire Croisée* of Modernism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), pp. 25-47 (p. 36).

<sup>13</sup> See Bahun, p. 27, and Boatca, p. 191. Balkanism is a term coined by Maria Todorova in *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997),

citizens. The young literary critic Eugen Ionescu (Ionesco's Romanian name) was similarly critical of the French influence on Romanian letters and made it his mission to break free of this overwhelming spectre. Tzara and his collaborators reworked the poetic conventions of French Symbolism in order to respond to violent attacks from the nationalist groups and articulate an alternative local aesthetic.

## 1. Neocolonialism and Cultural Dependency

The creation of modern Romania was a result of the penetration of Western modernity in the area. The Treaty of Paris (1854) limited the Ottoman and Russian political control over the Romanian Principalities and allowed the export of Romanian grains to Western Europe via the Danube and the Black Sea, thus co-opting them into the dynamic of Anglo-French capitalism and the whirlwind of modernization.<sup>14</sup> Manuela Boatca suggests that: “Given that the Ottoman Empire had behaved more like a traditional world empire – using control of its provinces in order to finance military campaigns and luxury spending, the ‘shift of peripheral axis’ from the periphery of the Empire to that of the Western capitalist core that the Romanian principalities underwent in the nineteenth century amounted to a transition from a ‘protocolonial system’ under Ottoman rule to a ‘neocolonial’ one as an agricultural periphery of the capitalist world-economy controlled from Western Europe.”<sup>15</sup> More important for the present discussion, apart from the fact that Romania became an agrarian supplier and market for Western goods – is the paradigm shift. The ensuing reorientation towards Western forms and values, and distancing from Ottoman Empire entailed massive social and cultural changes at odds with the traditional structures.

The abrupt shift from an Ottoman Balkan past to Western modernity, driven by the self-colonizing aspirations of Romania's cosmopolitan elites, was in significant ways effected along the lines of a “cultural dependency” on European models, particularly on France. Building on Boatca's analysis of a Romanian neo-colonial context, I read Romania's Eurocentric aspirations and anxieties as typical of what Declan Kiberd takes to be among the most insidious effects of colonialism, “an accompanying psychology of self-doubt and

---

<sup>14</sup> See Z. Ornea, *Anii Treizeci. Extrema Dreapta Romaneasca* [The Thirties: The Romanian Extreme Right] (Bucharest: Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane), pp. 21-2.

<sup>15</sup> Boatca, 189-90.

dependency”.<sup>16</sup> My contention is that the colonial pathology was present in Romania as well, even if outside the classical model of territorial occupation and economic exploitation. I concur with Kiberd’s belief that current models of postcoloniality need to be revised to include geographies – Eastern Europe among them – affected by power relations with the West that are not administratively regulated and often more insidious. Having thrown off the shackles of protocolonial imperialism, young Romania was formed in the image of the homogenous European nation-state and emulated its political ambitions.<sup>17</sup> It changed the exploitative imperial framework for a complicated neo-colonial relationship with the West. This was a diffuse colonialism, whose agency was difficult to detect.

Romania’s political and cultural links to France have been convincingly documented by Lucian Boia, Angela Jianu and Monica Spiridon, among others.<sup>18</sup> As France was consolidating her position as modernity’s cultural epicentre, it exported to the newly enfranchised Eastern Europe its political ideas and cultural patronage. In the absence of a local tradition, France furthermore furnished the missing cultural heritage. So much so that Benjamin Fondane – another Romanian exile on the Seine – notoriously and controversially claimed that “our culture [...] became a colony – a colony of French culture.”<sup>19</sup> Many believed, like Fondane, that the cultural emulation of France frustrated the development of an authentic Romanian culture. “We don’t have a soul – a distinctive soul of our own – as long as we cannot create a literature which can stand by itself, without any support from outside”, Fondane writes.<sup>20</sup> The soullessness bemoaned by Fondane is the crux of Romania’s identity anxieties and marked its modernity and modernism. Like Fondane, other leading Romanian modernist figures – poet Vasile Alecsandri, the literary critic Titu Maiorescu, the

---

<sup>16</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Vintage: London: 1996), p. 6. Kiberd argues that the symptoms of cultural dependency are more difficult to reverse/alleviate. “It was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory”, he writes.

<sup>17</sup> Todorova, pp. 5, 13.

<sup>18</sup> See Lucian Boia, Angela Jianu and Monica Spiridon, “Literature and the Symbolic Engineering of the European Self,” *European Review*, 17 (2009), 149-159.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Fundoianu, *Imagini și cărți din Franța* [Images And Books From France] (Bucharest: ICR, 2006), p. 7.

Cultura noastră a evoluat, si-a desenat o figura, si o stare, a devenit o colonie – o colonie a culturii frantuzesti.

<sup>20</sup> Fundoianu, p. 6.

N-avem un suflet – un suflet diferit si personal – de vreme ce nu putem crea o literatura care sa stea in picioare, fara nici o atarnare in afara.

playwright I.L. Caragiale, historian Nicolae Iorga, poet and Tzara's friend Ion Vinea, not to mention Ionesco and his generation – made cultural specificity their most important concern, if from different ideological positions.

Writing the nation was complicated by Romania's divided constituencies, visions and allegiances. While the process of political and technological modernization was inevitable and necessary, social groups that were invested economically or emotionally in the traditional structure, resisted change and issued nostalgic panegyrics about the past or bitter diatribes against modernity. They believed that the modern political forms and institutions of Western inspiration were incompatible with local traditional culture. The struggle between modernity and tradition was thus embedded in the structure of the Romanian state. Uneven development also meant that pockets of urban modernity coexisted incongruently with feudal rural communities. The two different communities with different sensibilities and needs co-habited, merged and clashed. The antinomies between the different visions, legacies and constituencies of the nation became manifest in questions of identity politics and aesthetics.

These anxieties took a specific postcolonial form, and were grounded in a cultural hybridity at odds with the political framework of the nation-state. A long history of political domination and cultural crossovers resisted modernity's homogenizing drive and nationalist attempts to invent a pure past. Romania's troubled identity emerged from this traumatic encounter between the disenfranchising cosmopolitanism of the old Empires and the homogenizing ambitions of the nation-state. Romania's Balkan geography, imprinted by the Ottoman cultural and political legacy, would not yield to the European civilizing ambitions. Hybridity, multiculturalism and eclecticism prevailed despite frantic efforts to suppress it. There was always an excess, a spill-over which resisted categorisation and could, as I will show, only be expressed aesthetically by way of "absurdism". Criticism, journalism and literary forms highlighted, by way of irony, the excesses, aberrations, contradictions and shortcomings of the national project. In this thesis, I reconstruct a genealogy of the absurd – the experimental aesthetics that Tzara and Ionesco share – by tracing the radicalization of irony in Romanian articulations of national identity.

I follow the convergence of critical discourses and literary forms which articulate, contend and correct the coordinates of the nation, particularly in terms of its ambivalent relationship with the West. I examine the evolution of an aesthetic of radical irony from the

first writings on Romanian culture, to Titu Maiorescu and I.L. Caragiale, and then to the full-blown absurdism of Tzara and Ionesco. Gelu Ionescu, the first scholar of Ionesco's Romanian work, has pointed out the existence of a Romanian counter-tradition of "hypercriticism" which links Eugène Ionesco to Maiorescu, Caragiale and the Romanian avant-garde.<sup>21</sup> I read, in my turn, Ionesco and Tzara as part of this tradition which transgresses the strict temporal and aesthetic boundaries normally attributed to modernism.<sup>22</sup> This allows me to go back to the foundational problems of Romanian culture in order to understand that tradition to which, as Ionesco put it, "I belong, for better or for worse".<sup>23</sup>

I develop Gelu Ionescu's paradigm by exploring the formal and conceptual continuities that run through this critical tradition. To reflect on their aesthetic strategies, I use Romanian critic Constantin Rădulescu-Motru's concept of *zeflemea* which he defines as light coffee-shop banter, well-suited to the character of the Romanian language.<sup>24</sup> Developed to counter the condescending and overcritical attitude of the Romanian elite educated abroad towards the backwardness and inadequacies of their country, the concept of *zeflemea* gestures towards an aesthetic continuous with "absurdism". In fact, what Rădulescu-Motru read as light banter has a radical critical edge and spans the entire ironic spectrum from satire to the grotesque. I am particularly alert to how irony negotiated the antinomies between local and cosmopolitan, East and West, tradition and modernity, and how language and style internalized the tension.

As Rădulescu-Motru indicates, the language itself incorporated the antagonisms inherent in the culture. Words of Turkish origin like *zeflemea*, for example, which were the linguistic legacy of the Ottoman rule in the Danubian Principalities, acquired derogatory

---

<sup>21</sup> Gelu Ionescu, *Anatomia Unei Negatii* [The Anatomy of a Negation] (Bucuresti: Minerva, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Within the Anglo-American canon, high modernism is associated with the period between 1910 and 1925, while more expansive definitions acknowledge earlier European sources and later significant sequels between 1880 and 1950. See Bradbury and McFarlane, pp. 25, 31. Also see Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) and Rachel Potter, *Modernist Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 255.

<sup>24</sup> Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, *Cultura Română și Politicianismul*, [Romanian Culture and Politicization] (Bucharest: Libraria Socecu, 1904).

meaning, reflecting thus the political and emotional dimension of that cultural exchange. *Zeflemea* [Turkish *zevklenmek* = light irony, mocking, mocking joke] was accordingly grosser, more caustic and more personal, unlike the sophisticated French *ironie* or English wit. It also employed the derogatory semantic of Turkish words as a humiliating reminder of the country's Oriental legacy. The local culture, moreover, had a strong oral dimension and preserved the grotesque irreverence of the vernacular. The jagged temporality of Romanian modernity, which brought together the medieval structures of the local oral tradition and the dazzling modernity of the West, engendered important crossovers between high culture and the vernacular. The liberating affirmative parodic mode, which as Mikhail Bakhtin notes is characteristic of folk culture, was employed to express modernist disenchantment with the nation-state. Whereas for vernacular cultures the grotesque enacted symbolic resistance to the repressive structures of the state, modernist self-parody was a symptom of the fragmentation of identity intensified by Romania's divided legacies. Forms of parody served either to celebrate or criticize excess, eclecticism and paradox.<sup>25</sup>

On a postcolonial account of Romania's emulation of "foreign ideas, cultural representations and structures of power", irony articulates the clash between discursive formations within the subject and the nation, the residue of otherness typical of "split" colonial identities.<sup>26</sup> In view of French cultural domination, the projection of the "otherness" of Western modernity is part of the psychic dynamic of Romanian national identity. Romanian modernism, feeling the pull of these conflicting drives, plays up a complicated dynamic between the national and the cosmopolitan. In this case, textual dialogism reflects a conflictual rather than collaborative exchange within the linguistic community that Homi Bhabha describes as discursive "hybridity".<sup>27</sup> The identity and linguistic splits of Romanian modernism informed the displacements and freakishness, or absurdism of its aesthetic articulations.

---

<sup>25</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1965).

<sup>26</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Bhabha, p. 13.

## 2. Caragiale's Absurd Body

After a life-long political and artistic battle with the vicissitudes of the young Romanian state, Romanian playwright I.L. Caragiale (1852-1912), inherited money, chose the easier ways of Central Europe and settled in Berlin in 1905. There he could enjoy better quality classical music. In a letter to a friend back home during that summer, the acknowledged precursor of both Tzara and Ionesco, offers a startling description of Romania:

Would it be possible for me not to know, Dear Sir, why ever you love Brasov and all things German, Hungarian and Romanian in Ardeal [Transylvania]? Even if you hadn't told me I would have known it anyway, as well as the reason for it. It is of course further away from Bucharest and Ploiesti to Brasov, Feldioara, Sighisoara, etc, etc., than from these latter to the banks of the Rhine, or to the coasts of the two North Seas. Ardeal welcomes the booted feet of the European body; in Bucharest and Ploiesti resides, full of vermin and bleeding from so much scratching, but hair-styled *à la Parisienne*, the bust of the Bulgarian-Gypsy body, the most disgusting part of this bastardised and ignoble oriental type. And I am sure that you would love too, even more, Germany, the forehead of the body which only reached the Carpathian mountains with its feet, and to our (those living today) misfortune, could not cross at least up to the Balkans.<sup>28</sup>

Caragiale's graphic description of Romania's grotesque body comes with all the appurtenances of racist discourse. The only reservation is that this was self-inflicted racist abuse. The disgusting body Caragiale describes is his own. It could be said that distance is granted by exile, hence the violence and the scorn; in other words, that once in Berlin, the playwright no longer identified with that body. But this is a problematic proposition. For Caragiale's self-deprecating distance is also constitutive of a Romanian identity torn between European aspirations and an Oriental legacy. His text enacts Europe's encounter with its bastardized Balkan other, its gaze transfixed by a horrifying combination of

---

<sup>28</sup> I. L. Caragiale, *Despre Lume, Arta Si Neamul Romanesc*, ed. by Dan C. Mihailescu (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1994), p. 102.

Cum sa nu stiu, draga Domnule [ Dr. Alceu Urechia], ma rog frumos, ca iubesti Brasovul si toate cele sasesti, ungesti si romanesti din Ardeal? Fara sa-mi fi spus stiam si anume de ce. E desigur mai departe de la Bucuresti si Ploiesti pana la Brasov, Feldioara, Sighisoara etc., etc. decat de la acestea pana pe malurile Rinului, ori la coastele celor doua mari nordice. In Ardeal ajung picioarele incaltate ale corpului european; la Bucuresti si Ploiesti etc. sta plin de paraziti, sangerat de scarpinatura, dar frizat *à la Parisienne*, corpul trupului bulgaro-tiganesc, cea mai dezgustatoare parte a acestui bastard si ignobil tip oriental. Si sunt convins ca ai iubi si tu, cu atat mai mult, Germania, fruntea corpului care a ajuns cu picioarele pana-n Carpati si, spre nefericirea noastra, a celor de astazi, nu a putut trece macar pana-n Balcani.



strangeness and familiarity: an infested Gypsy-Bulgarian body masquerading French fashionable styles.

The racist division of the European body, which endorses a repressive mind/body dichotomy, is evident in the anatomical distribution of its geography. The Carpathians are attributed the marginality and impurity of feet, while Germany stands for the enlightening height of the forehead. But while Transylvania – at the time still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – just about makes it onto the European body politic standing in as its civilized feet, Wallachia (the southern Romanian Principality) is altogether banished to the Balkans' monstrous geography. Most striking, between Europe's virtues and the shortcomings of the Balkans, Romania is an absence. It is not an accident that when Caragiale's gaze approaches what were by all standards the geographical coordinates of Romania (in its then shape) – two of its most important cities, Bucharest and Ploiesti – he finds, surprisingly, not a Romanian, but a fetid Bulgarian-Gypsy body.

Up to that point the playwright's gaze coincides with the European geo-political vision. But when he gets to Romania, he encounters an absence which only a Romanian could have perceived. The playwright does not recognize the socio-geographical entity as Romania: he sees Gypsy and Bulgarian, where a Westerner would see Romania. While Caragiale has in mind an ideal Romania which does not fit with the monstrous body he sees, a Western European would not have had any expectations. In order to perform the painful mental operation of being disgusted by his own body, the playwright dissociates, playing out instead racial discriminations toward other others, Gypsies and Bulgarians. The fact that he only refers to a Romania specifically in relation to Transylvania – at the time not yet part of the Romanian state – and not when it comes to actual Romania, represented in the text by its capital Bucharest and Caragiale's hometown Ploiesti – is a significant silence. Romania was still to be written.

Caragiale's letter from Berlin re-enacts the encounter between Western European modernity and "an other than modernity" hybrid Balkan geography, which prompted the creation of the modern Romanian state in 1866. It contains *in nuce* the political, cultural and stylistic issues examined in this thesis: the caustic irony of the sophisticated elite, and the internalized stigma of Eurocentric discourse and its anxious relation with France. Caught between the aspirations dictated by a Western education and what they perceived as a resistant Balkan counter-modernity, intellectuals like Caragiale were at pains to articulate an

identity which would reconcile the divergent dimensions of the national project. Until the Second World War and the waning of modernism into social realism, Romanian culture was concerned with imagining this problematic identity. Literature was in search of aesthetic formulas to express a Romanian specificity which remained elusive. The mediation of Western European cultural hegemony aggravated the challenge, as is evident from Caragiale's letter. The ensuing debates, anxieties, failures and rebellions wove the fabric of Romanian modernism. This absurd Romanian body is the focus of my investigation in the new reading of Tzara's and Ionesco's texts. Their artistic journeys and aesthetic investigations, I grant, are intricately linked to the positions they assumed in these debates and the artistic resolutions they imagined for Romania's identity anxieties.

Like Caragiale, Tzara and Ionesco emigrated westwards to find artistic salvation, with the very significant difference that they chose Paris (via Zurich, in Tzara's case). Caragiale, although nodding towards the intimidating cultural spectre of France, does so disparagingly to express his distaste for Romania's ridiculous Francophone penchant. His choice of Berlin as exile destination is in fact a lot more political than a simple metropolitan preference would warrant. According to the playwright, Romania's body was all the more disgusting for its pathetic attempt to emulate Parisian styles. His critique was part of a larger reaction to the Romanian Francophilia initiated by the first political leaders of the modern state. The perceived failure of modern Romania to materialize into a coherent political entity was seen as a side effect of indiscriminate emulation of French ideas and forms. This critical stance, which Caragiale shared with the members of the cultural society *Junimea*, was however informed, as his choice of metropolis confirms, by German influences. *Junimea's* conservative position, in favour of organic social development and autochthonous modernity, drew on German romantic philosophy and was rehashing the nationalist themes of European Restoration.<sup>29</sup>

However, if several cultural influences, the German one conspicuous in *Junimea's* case, were competing in this liminal space, at the crossroads between the Habsburg, the Ottoman and the Tsarist Empires, Caragiale and *Junimea's* criticism of Francophilia, like the

---

<sup>29</sup> *Junimea* [The Youth] was a Romanian cultural society set up in 1863 by Western-educated intellectuals and led by literary critic Titu Maiorescu. Its main scope was to assist the Romania's cultural development while at the same time keeping in check the excessive imitation of Western forms. See Keith Hitchins, *Romania: 1866-1947* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) pp. 56-7, 60-61,

focus of this thesis, is granted by the special spell France exerted on the national imagination. Despite *Junimea*'s acerbic criticism of Francophilia, France continued to exert a spellbinding influence on the Romanian psyche. By Tzara's and Ionesco's times, the attraction of Paris, the capital of European modernism, compounded the attachment and Romanians got better at wearing French style. The artists who populated the European avant-garde based in Paris – Brancuși, Tzara, Fondane and Ionesco among them – finally overcame their cultural anxieties and caught up with the aesthetic temporality of modernity. The question is whether their modernist forms at long last re-inscribed in a European corpus did away with that “Bulgarian-Gypsy” body or, else, emboldened by modernism's innovative impetus, wholly embraced it.

### **3. Balkanism and Orientalism**

The self-doubt which marked Romanian identity from the very beginning was, on the one hand, the corollary of a perceived cultural dependency on France, and on the other, an internalization of the Balkan stigma, as is evident from Caragiale's letter. The Romanian elites imported Western prejudices along with political and cultural modernity. As Larry Wolff shows, from the Enlightenment onward, Eastern Europe was consistently invented as an acultural, backward space, a cultural and political degree zero.<sup>30</sup> Maria Todorova, inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, suggests the concept of ‘Balkanism’ to examine Western prejudices about the Balkans. In a perceptive analysis which captures Caragiale's disgusted confusion, Todorova describes Balkanism as the reductive and stereotypical discourse of the West about the Balkans' imputed ambiguity and hybridity, their incongruent medley of Ottoman and European traits.<sup>31</sup> Hayden-Bakić develops Todorova's term, by reflecting on the collateral effects of Balkanism, the “nesting Orientalisms” whereby an “other” is perpetually pointed at, by geographical and racial gradation, to take the blame and relieve the burden.<sup>32</sup> Caragiale's racist castigation of the Bulgarian-Gypsy features of the Romanian

---

<sup>30</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: the map of the civilization on the mind of the enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Todorova, pp. 5-7.

<sup>32</sup> See Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia”, *Slavic Review* 54 (1995), 917-31 (p. 920)

body is a case in point. More recently, Bjelić and Savić foreground the hierarchical dichotomies – rational/irrational, centre/periphery, civilization/barbarism – underwriting the abusive framework of Balkanism around which Caragiale’s map of Romania is drawn.<sup>33</sup>

The biases associated with the Balkans complicated both Western perceptions of Romania and Romania’s own identity narratives, as illustrated by Caragiale’s text. Caught between the inability to catch up with Western modernity, the desperate attempt to preserve the local culture while achieving national emancipation, and a wishful identification with Western values which, to complicate things further, keep them at bay as an inferior “other”, an extremely troubled identity was born. Nataša Kovačević has, in the same vein, linked identity anxieties in Eastern Europe to the internalization of colonial discourse and its incorporation at the core national definitions in an endeavour to disprove Western criticism and achieve a much sought-for membership of Europe:

This preoccupation of Eastern Europeans with their various reflections in the Western mirror and concomitant self-stigmatization or self-celebration are perhaps the most elusive and least discussed avatars of what could be called for lack of a better theoretical term, Eastern European Orientalism.<sup>34</sup>

Torn between these competing cultural legacies, claims and anxieties, between internalized Balkanism and Eurocentrism, Romania struggled to articulate itself as an authentic entity. Todorova claims that the Balkans’ ambiguity and resistance to pre-existing schemata determined their neglect in discussions of postcolonialism and orientalism.<sup>35</sup> If prohibitive for scholars, these inherent taxonomic difficulties proved to be fertile in terms of creative and critical articulations of aesthetic modernity in Romania.

---

The gradation of "Orients" that I call "nesting orientalism" is a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised. In this pattern, Asia is more "East" or "other" than eastern Europe; within eastern Europe itself this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most "eastern"; within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies.

<sup>33</sup> Dušan Bjelić and Obrad Savić, *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Todorova, p. 17.

#### 4. Absurd Romania

The Romanian critic Sorin Alexandrescu wonders whether the complexities and paradoxes of Romanian culture might be articulated coherently in an edifying image or concept of the “Romanian psyche”.<sup>36</sup> The absurd might well be the form which accommodates the anxieties and unhomeliness of this identity. E.M. Cioran, French-Romanian philosopher and Ionesco’s friend, perfectly illustrates how absurdity is embedded in Romanian discourses of identity:

There are countries which enjoy a kind of benediction, a kind of grace: everything succeeds for them, even their misfortunes, even their catastrophes: and there are others which cannot carry it off, whose very triumphs are equivalent to failures.... To be French is obviously enough: one neither suffers from it, nor does one rejoice over it; one possesses a certainty which justifies the old interrogation: ‘How can one be a Persian?’. The paradox of being a Persian (or as the case would have it, a Rumanian) is a torment one must know how to exploit, a defect by which one must profit. I confess I once regarded it as a disgrace to belong to an ordinary nation, to a collectivity of victims about whose origin no illusion was permitted...What an ordeal for my young arrogance! ‘How can one be a Rumanian?’ was a question I could answer only by constant mortification. Hating my people, my country, its timeless peasants enamoured of their own torpor and almost bursting with hebetude, I blushed to be descended from them, repudiated them, rejected their sub-eternity, their larval certainties, their geologic reverie... I never stopped cursing the accident that caused me to be born among them. One great idea possessed them: the idea of destiny. I repudiated it with all my strength, saw in it nothing but the subterfuge of poltroons, an excuse for every abdication, and expression of common sense and its funeral philosophy. What could I cling to? My country whose existence, obviously made no sense and seemed to me a resume of nothingness or a materialization of the inconceivable, a sort of Spain without its Siglo de Oro, without conquests or madness or without a Don Quixote of our woes. To belong to it – what a lesson in humiliation and sarcasm, what a calamity, what a leprosy! [my emphasis]<sup>37</sup>

A good fifty years later, Cioran reiterated Caragiale’s feelings in stronger and more explicit terms, with an increased awareness of Romania’s predicament. Exiled in Paris after a short-lived association with the Romanian extreme right, Cioran had for a long time been silenced by the traumatic surrender of his native language. When he finally found his voice in French, the frustration accumulated over the years came out in this torrent of vituperations. *The Temptation to Exist*, as the title suggests, voices explicitly the Romanian inferiority complexes which motivated Cioran’s affiliation with the Romanian extreme right “The Iron

---

<sup>36</sup> Sorin Alexandrescu, “Paradoxul Român”, *International Journal of Romanian Studies*, 1 (1976), 9-20 (p. 11).

<sup>37</sup> E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), pp. 69-71, 73.

Guard". But the stylistic excesses betray, apart from a torturing guilt, the distress of exile which he perceived as consequent upon his Romanian origins, so difficult to shake off. There had been a silence of 12 years between his last book in Romanian *Lacrimi și Sfinți* [Tears and Saints] (1937), and the first in French, *Précis de décomposition* [A Short History of Decay] (1949). His Romanian ghost followed him to Paris, where unknown and unable to write in French, he started from scratch in the immigrant cultural underground.

Cioran's lament does a good job at expressing the discomfiture of being Romanian. His description is again bracketed by the opposite poles of Europe and the Orient, by traumatic feelings of uncertainty, unworthiness, shame, powerlessness and existential crisis. Romania's spiritual attachment to Western Europe and the attendant rejection set up the conditions of an absurd existence truncated by impossible expectations, marginalization, invisibility and silence. Alexandrescu contends that Romanian intellectuals, like Cioran, experienced feelings of "agonizing loneliness" and "a longing for somewhere else which is nowhere" when confronted with Western indifference.<sup>38</sup> Caught up in the deadlock between an unattainable ideal and an unworthy reality, Romania is for Cioran, as for Caragiale before him, conceptual impossibility and semantic absence.

While still in Romania, Cioran hoped the odds could change and bring to Romania the deserved attention and glory. Inspired by Nietzsche and Spengler, *Schimbarea la Față a României* [The Transfiguration of Romania] (1936) speculates on the tragedy of small cultures in search for a way out of sub-history. History ruthlessly divides the world, he writes, into victors or victims. The lack of historical instinct and aggressiveness characteristic of the great cultures most often associated with conquest and colonization, relegated Romania to sub-history, i.e. to political non-existence or what he later described as a "collectivity of victims". He concludes that Romania has to rid itself of the Balkanic spirit in order to achieve progress and prosperity. His description of the Balkans replicates not only Caragiale's account of European geopolitics, but also his racism:

The Balkans is not only on the geographic periphery of Europe, but also on the spiritual one; more so on the spiritual periphery. Leftovers, lechers, moral gangrene, spiritual imbecility, narrow horizon, all determine a weird and sad physiognomy, depressingly grotesque. The Balkans in their essence represents failed struggle, closed dynamics, and pathetic sterility.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> See "Paradoxul", p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> E. M. Cioran, *Schimbarea la Față a României* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), p. 196.

The excerpt illustrates perfectly the internalized-stigma and the tortured identity associated with the Balkans. The cultural attachment to Western Europe leads the philosopher to subscribe to the derogatory representation of the Balkans. Complete identification with the West remains nevertheless, forever frustrated by stubborn residues of this undesirable “otherness”. Cioran’s unappeased resentment took him from right-wing nationalist fanaticism to total rejection of national allegiance, and his entire oeuvre – the relentless irony and scepticism – is a dramatization of this aporia.

Sean Cotter links Cioran’s youthful extremism and Romania’s anxieties about its secondary status to the condition of smaller nations aspiring to major status. Since this “fantasy of power and significance” is not only inherently unfeasible but also politically unpalatable in view of its aggressive valences, Cotter suggests an alternative mode of national identification, one of deliberate embracing of the minor through translation, ironic detachment, translocalism and interactivity. By revelling in its “defects”, the minor shows up the major’s ambitions of purity and control, and challenges the hegemony models of cultural interaction. This was Cioran’s way to circumvent his “major-minded minority” or the centre/periphery conundrum in his later much-acclaimed French work (starting with *A Short History of Decay*) which Cotter shows, was heavily informed by his translation experience and reflected in the editing process for the French translations of his own Romanian works. However, since I read earlier texts which, like Cioran’s *The Temptation to Exist*, were still very much invested in the nationalist imagination, Cotter’s analysis is useful to frame the extent to which Romanian modernism was still under the spell of “the major”, troubled by its secondary status and by its dependence on translation.<sup>40</sup>

Ionesco, who spent important years of his childhood in France, had even more reasons to resent Romania’s marginality, which he perceived as foreign and hostile. In his case, the imaginative split in Romania’s cultural consciousness found biographical confirmation. His attachment to Romania remained ambivalent to the end, oscillating

---

Balcanii nu sunt numai la periferia geografica a Europei, ci si la cea spirituala. Mai cu seama la aceasta. Resturile, scursurile, cangrena morala, imbecilitati ale instinctului, orizont imediat, determina toate o fizionomie caraghioasa si trista, de un grotesc deprimant. Balcanul in esenta lui reprezinta o zvarcolire ratata, un dinamism inchis, o sterilitate jalnica.’

<sup>40</sup> See Sean Cotter, *Literary Translation and the Idea of a Minor Romania* (New York: Rochester UP, 2014), pp. 1-2, 7.

between adamant rejection before his exile, and nostalgic identification while in France.

After his first trip to Paris as an adult, Ionesco wrote down his feelings:

Here. I am back from Paris. It was great [magnificent]. I am thoroughly and painfully aware that leaving that place, I exiled myself. I am here an exile. There I felt more alive, more real, and more importantly, I felt good, good, good, as if at home, as if in my real country. I suffer terribly at the thought that I am condemned to stay here, in the Balkans, that I falsified my destiny leaving France. I came back [to the country = to my country], overwhelmed by sadness.<sup>41</sup>

The diary entry appears to be a straightforward statement of Ionesco's allegiance to French culture, in line with a persistent discourse of belonging, which the playwright's estate has continued to support since his death. Ionesco's grandmother from his mother's side was French and his family lived in France for several years during his childhood, or so the story, confirmed to a large extent by biographical details, goes. Ionesco therefore felt French. Yet, a careful reading of the fragment belies the biographical fiction and the wishful identification with France. Despite the dramatic and irreconcilable opposition between here and there, i.e. East and West, and the ensuing binary qualities, dead vs. alive, false/ absent/ invisible/surreal vs. real, France inhabits the fictional realms of the optative "as if", while Romania is an undesirable, yet undeniable here. Language obstructs the metaphorical reversal the playwright tries to effect in order to rid himself of an unwanted home. In the last sentence, what Ionesco writes in Romanian, *mot à mot* "I came back to the country" which means "I came back to my [home] country" is what any Romanian would say on returning to Romania, and would never say about another country. That lack of specification in "to the country" – "which country?" logic would normally require – implies a self-explanatory familiarity and identity, and an emotive semantics shared with the reader. One would not say that to a non-Romanian, even if resident in Romania, because for a non-Romanian, Romania

---

<sup>41</sup> My translation of Eugène Ionesco's diary entry of 31 August 1937, quoted in Marie-France Ionesco, "Ionesco s-a simțit în exil în România, nu în Franța" [Ionesco Felt He Was in Exile in Romania, not in France] (Open Letter), *Evenimentul Zilei* [online], 10 July 2009 < <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/ionesco-s-a-simtit-in-exil-in-romania-nu-in-franta-858397.html> > [accessed 20 December 2012], section VI.

Iată. M-am întors de la Paris. A fost magnific. Îmi dau bine, dureros de limpede seama că plecând de acolo, m'am exilat. Eu sunt aici un exilat. Acolo m'am simțit mai viu, mai substanțializat și, mai ales, m-am simțit bine, bine, bine, ca la mine acasă, ca în țara mea adevărată. Sufăr îngrozitor la gândul că sunt condamnat să rămân aici, în Balkani, că mi-am falsificat destinul plecând din Franța. M-am întors în țară, covârșit de tristețe.



is not “it”, “the country”. And this being a diary entry, Ionesco was of course writing for himself.

Ionesco’s disavowal was largely motivated by the political radicalization of Romania during the 1930s when most of his generational colleagues, including Cioran, succumbed to the anti-Semitism and fanaticism of the “Iron Guard”. But as his critical pamphlet *Nu* attests, his allegiance to France was also motivated by the frustrations of belonging to a minor culture. The internalized stigma proved to be so long lasting that the estate continued to defend fervently the wishful identification with France after the writer’s death. Ionesco’s centenary in 2009 was the last episode of a stormy relationship between Romanian institutions and the estate. Ionesco’s daughter, Marie France Ionesco refused to allow Romanian theatres to stage his work as part of the celebration because she understood that to be an implicit nationalistic appropriation of the playwright.<sup>42</sup>

The overarching reason for this reluctance, Marie France claims, is not racism, of which she has been accused, but Ionesco’s adamant wish not to be appropriated by any nationalism or categorization. This would have been perfectly appropriate if Ionesco’s daughter had not chosen to justify her decision by quoting the playwright’s endorsement of French nationalism:

Romanian nationalism disgusts me. It’s unjustified, it’s impertinent, it’s malicious, it’s gross (uncouth), it’s pretentious. Yet, I would be a French nationalist. French nationalism is a great spiritual mood, a life philosophy (attitude); a fight for the prevalence of a kind of intelligence over another kind of intelligence.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> On 26 November 2009, Eugène Ionesco would have been 100 years old. Various Romanian institutions were planning throughout the year festive productions of Ionesco’s plays which were met with opposition from his estate. Articles reporting the dispute are among others, Georgeta Petrovici, “Eugène Ionesco Interzis Romanilor”, *Evenimentul Zilei* [Online], 02 April 2009 <<http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/eugne-ionesco-interzis-romanilor-845750.html>> [accessed 20 December 2011]; Gabriela Lupu, “Marie-France Ionesco Boicoteaza Centenarul Ionesco pe Pamant Romanesc”, *Cotidianul* [Online], 25 February 2009 <[http://old.cotidianul.ro/marie\\_france\\_boicoteaza\\_centenarul\\_ionesco\\_pe\\_pamant\\_romanesc-74718.html](http://old.cotidianul.ro/marie_france_boicoteaza_centenarul_ionesco_pe_pamant_romanesc-74718.html)> [accessed 20 December 2011].

<sup>43</sup> My translation of a quotation from Ionesco’s diary entry of 31 August 1937, quoted in Marie-France, “Ionesco”, section v.

Un nationalism romanesc imi face oroare. E nejustificat, e obraznic, e rau, e grosolan, e pretentios. As fi in sa nationalist francez. Nationalismul francez e o pozitie spirituala mare, o atitudine de viata ; o lupta pentru preponderenta unui fel de inteligenta impotriva unui alt fel de inteligenta.

It is hardly necessary to point out that Ionesco, who even supported French colonialism, reproduces the Eurocentric power-game, which fuelled his cultural complexes. Ionesco's statement as well as his daughter's choice of quotation are problematic, to say the least. There is a sense that Ionesco and the estate are clinging desperately to an insecure French identity, which is all the more precious as it is unachievable. The irony is that the wishful identification with France and the ensuing anxiety is a concern at the core of Romanian identity and the playwright's assimilation a strange homecoming.

Little did Ionesco know that he was not the only one to feel exiled at home. Tzara was notoriously reluctant to speak or write about Romania. But his good friend and fellow avant-gardist Ion Vinea concurred with Ionesco's idea of exile in one's own country. After Tzara's flight to Zurich, Vinea continued his avant-garde journalistic and artistic career in Romania and published Tzara's Romanian work. During his time as editor of the avant-garde review *Contimporanul* [1921], which published Tzara's and Fondane's poetry and Marcel Janco's drawings, Vinea wrote:

The landscapes of Paris and Berlin in full artistic bloom do they not awake, alas, in today's writer in Bucharest, the same feeling of futility? Like in the ancient world, two or three languages share the spiritual empire, where Glory resides oblivious of other languages. For the true thinker who wants to partake in the spiritual life of the century, his different language is hence an exile and a burden.<sup>44</sup>

This quotation illuminates the painful issues faced by both Tzara and Ionesco as writers of Romanian language, the ambivalent allegiances and their difficult journeys.

In the same year, Benjamin Fondane, the poet and philosopher who was also to take the road for Paris and subsequently die in a concentration camp during World War II, writes about shame and unworthiness in "Windows Towards the Occident". When exposed and confronted with Western Europe, the cultural landscape in Romania appears ridiculous, Fondane feels:

---

<sup>44</sup> Ion Vinea, „Blestemul Leului”, *Contimporanul*, An I, No. 14, 15 Octombrie 1922, p. 8.

In scriitorul de azi din Bucuresti, priverlistea Parisului si a Berlinului, in plina creatie nu cumva trebuie sa iste aceeasi trezire si acelas sentiment al zadarniciei? Ca in lumea antica, doua sau trei limbi isi impart imperiul spiritual in care troneaza, nestiutoare de alte graiuri, Gloria. Pentru ganditorul adevarat care vrea sa participe la viata spirituala a secolului, limba lui diferita, e deci un exil, si o osanda.

The idea only that we could be translated makes us regret the times when Bucharest was thought to be in Serbia, when Huysmans was talking about a strange species of Wallachian hens, when foreign adventurers believed that here you can buy nobility titles and Villiers de L'Isle Adam affirmed that in Bessarabia custom has it that the host must necessarily treat the guests with his daughter as well. [...] Ah, until they don't have a proper look inside, let's cover the windows in chalk, so that they cannot see that we are victorious and we don't have a Goethe. Let's cover in chalk the windows towards the Occident!<sup>45</sup>

There is a strange conflict here between Western Europeans' exoticisation of Romania, which is ironically sanctioned, and what Fondane thinks to be the truth about Romania and how outsiders would react to that truth. Between the Romanians, the Western spectators, a third persona appears as a trope to mediate the encounter. This third persona is what Fondane imagines the foreigner to be, from the perspective of his experience, mostly scholarly and passive at that point, of the West, i.e. the ideal Westerner in the Romanian consciousness. The ideal Westerner like ideal Romania, of course, only existed in the Romanian consciousness. If certain tropes, biases and concerns surface again and again with critics and artists alike, there were also strong disagreements as to the ideal shape of ideal Romania.

## 5. Cosmopolitan Sensibilities and Cosmopolitan Canons

Tzara and Ionesco, like other European and American modernists in Zurich and Paris, were cosmopolitans. Since Ancient Greece, the concept of cosmopolitanism has subsumed moral and socio-political ideas about identity with and responsibility for an extended worldwide

---

<sup>45</sup> B. Fundoianu, "Ferestre spre Occident", *Contimporanul*, Anul 1, No. 1, 3 Iunie 1922, p. 12.

Ideea numai ca am putea fi tradusi ne face sa regretam vremea cand Bucurestii erau banuiti in Serbia, cand Huysmans vorbea de o specie curioasa de gaini valahe, cand aventurierii straini credeau ca la noi titlurile de noblete se cumpara si Villiers de L'Isle Adam afirma ca in Bessarabia e obiceiul a gazda sa-si ofere, numaidecat, si fiica. [...] Ah, pana cand nu se vor uita inca bine inaintre, sa murdarim geamurile cu crida, ca sa nu se vada ca suntem victoriosi si ca nu avem un Goethe!

Sa murdarim cu crida ferestrele – ferestrele din spre Occident.

community, beyond narrower ethnic and political belongings.<sup>46</sup> The modernists, by extension, identified with an international artistic community based in the European metropolises, Paris most notably, committed to aesthetic innovation and autonomy. They functioned, in other words, in a cultural space free of nationalist constraints, either canonical or political. As Raymond Williams explains, these artists found in the transnational capitals of art, both the material conditions and the alienating experiences they needed for their experimental forms.<sup>47</sup> For this reason modernism itself came to be defined, in Tim Armstrong's words, as "transnational phenomena characterized by cultural exchange, exile and displacement".<sup>48</sup>

By taking on modernism's cosmopolitan preference for metropolitan centres and detachment from national commitment, the modernist canon reproduces whatever traces of Eurocentric universalism undermined modernism's utopian project.<sup>49</sup> As Susan Friedman argues, by focusing on exile and displacement in the metropolitan capitals of the West as emblematic modernist topoi, the cosmopolitan internationalism which undergirds modernist studies, excludes non-Western cultures from the canon, thus reproducing the logic of Western colonialism.<sup>50</sup> Cosmopolitan approaches to modernism tend to view exile and displacement as the intrinsic conditions of modern consciousness, dismissing local sensibilities as parochial. Yet, their assumptions that Western sites and modes of modernism

---

<sup>46</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of cosmopolitanism see Robert Fine and Robin Cohen, "Four Cosmopolitan Moments" in *Conceiving cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, ed. by Robin Cohen and Steven Vertovec (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), pp. 137-62; see also Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism", in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1998), pp. 246-264 (p. 250). For different concepts and debates on cosmopolitanism and modernism see Janet Lyon, "Cosmopolitanism and Modernism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), pp. 388-412.

<sup>47</sup> Raymond Williams, 'When was modernism', *New Left Review*, 175 (1989), 48-52 (p. 50).

<sup>48</sup> Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 24.

<sup>49</sup> Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism", p. 250.

<sup>50</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, "World Modernisms, World Literatures, and Comparativity" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, pp. 499-524 (pp. 500-01). Most histories of modernism favour Western sites of modernism and focus on their cosmopolitan sensibilities. Apart from Armstrong and Williams, see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin, 1982), Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: Berkeley UP, 1995), Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, *Modernism* (New York: Penguin, 1976).

were sources of innovation to be disseminated to the non-Western peripheries engender a self-perpetuating critical bias which is very difficult to dislodge. By taking this modernist topography for granted we maintain the critical focus away from the marginal sites perpetuating their marginality. The result, Susan Stanford Friedman notes, is that very little is known about modernism outside its canonical centres and that, furthermore, because the modernist paradigm is built around these centres, we lack the interpretative tools to approach other modernisms.<sup>51</sup>

What this canonical focus on cosmopolitanism occludes is that modernists' itineraries to the imperial capitals were also reactions or solutions to identity issues at home, to anxieties about the prestige of their home cultures or to postcolonial contexts. The metaphysics of homelessness, which Williams believed the imperial metropolis afforded to émigré modernists, was in Romania's case a national malaise, as Caragiale's text signals.<sup>52</sup> Terry Eagleton argues in relation to Ireland that colonial dispossession – the absence or obfuscation of a national lineage – is paradigmatic for the capitalist rootlessness articulated by modernism's abstract forms: "Since Ireland, from the standpoint of advanced societies, is already a kind of non-place and non-identity, it can lend itself peculiarly well to a cosmopolitan modernism for which all places and identities are becoming progressively interchangeable."<sup>53</sup> Eagleton writes that although Joyce rejected the Catholic Irish tradition – a fact confirmed by his voluntary exile – his aesthetics are informed by an ambivalent relationship towards his culture.<sup>54</sup> Pascale Casanova conducts a similarly successful historical reading of Beckett whereby she shows how the playwright's aesthetic investigations were motivated by his ambivalent/denied affiliation to the Irish literary universe.<sup>55</sup> I mobilize Eagleton's and Casanova's Irish readings of Joyce and Beckett to illustrate the benefits of local appropriations of cosmopolitan modernism.

---

<sup>51</sup> Friedman, pp. 509-10.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, p. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment", in Terry Eagleton et al, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 23-39 (p. 35).

<sup>54</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 27-8.

In contradistinction, Casanova's study *The World Republic of Letters* posits the relative economic and political autonomy of the literary and the emancipatory function of cosmopolitanism, challenging by implication the parochialism of national literatures. Casanova offers an account of the complex cultural economy which transformed Paris into the absolute centre of the global literary map. "The world republic of letters", Casanova contends, functions according to its own laws which regulate the transnational literary traffic. Her study shows that cultural capital accrues from literary tradition (the age of the written culture), linguistic prestige (the reputation of a language based on political and cultural power), translatability (how many non-native speakers use the language), modernity (whether it is considered to be "new", in tune with "the most recent innovations in form and technique") and cosmopolitanism (the extent to which literature is independent of national constraints).

Casanova convincingly reconstructs the history of French cultural supremacy, from its emergence as the first modern vernacular to its gradual morphing into a universal language of political enlightenment and artistic sophistication. The cultural prestige thus accumulated and Paris's dazzling modernity attracted writers from less visible and less progressive cultures who found there propitious conditions for their art. Casanova's centre/periphery diffusion model is useful in so far as it explains the Gallocentric logic of many Romanian modernists, who were deeply aware of the limitations pertaining to a young East European culture in terms of prestige, modernity and visibility. Her global literary map is necessary for an understanding of Tzara's and Ionesco's transnational modernism. It also has the merit of making the first steps towards a comparative framework, in so far as it acknowledges, if in a reductive and biased manner, the local inflections of some important Paris-based cosmopolitan authors.

Casanova's study fails, however, to critique and deconstruct the diplomatic and colonial practices and Eurocentric assumptions which sponsored at least in part French literary ascendancy. Cultural criteria are not entirely independent of political and economic concerns. Paris has not acquired the status of "capital of the literary world" only because of its politically progressive history.<sup>56</sup> Its cultural prestige is imbricated with France's imperial history and wealth. The dazzling Parisian modernity with its monumental architecture,

---

<sup>56</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M.B. DeBevoise (London: Harvard UP, 2004), p. 23.

technological prowess and sophisticated audiences thrived on colonial returns. While assailing non-French nationalist bigotry, Casanova seems to endorse unwittingly the French nationalism which drove neo-colonial practices in Francophone states like Romania.

Significantly, Casanova presents Emil Cioran as the exile par excellence, with no home and history to speak of. Under the subtitle “On the inconvenience of being born in Romania”, Casanova reads Cioran among those “assimilated to great literary centres”:

But in the case of E.M. Cioran (1911-1995) the dependence was exclusively literary. Born into a relatively recent and deeply impoverished literary space, but one that was neither politically nor linguistically dominated by France, Cioran chose exile far from Romania. He betrayed its national cause to the point of abandoning his native language in favour of French, electing to integrate himself in the capital of literature in order to escape the fate of all writers from small countries.<sup>57</sup>

This account of Cioran’s artistic trajectory ignores Romania’s neo-colonial status. Romania’s attachment to France was not exclusively literary. As Sanja Bahun notes, cultural exchanges in the Balkan area were also dictated by political interests.<sup>58</sup> Not only did the French republicans disseminate their patriotism via the 1848 revolutionaries who laid the foundations of modern Romania, but also French diplomacy pursued close cultural relations with Romania in order to ensure its predominance over Russia. By brushing off these complexities behind a presumed complete assimilation and silencing the Romanian narrative, Casanova’s account affirms the Eurocentric propensities of cosmopolitan modernist canons.

Moreover, in keeping with the neo-colonial logic of cosmopolitan modernism, Casanova marginalizes Romania’s modernist legacy by too readily assuming its deficiencies. By including Cioran under the category of “assimilated writers”, Casanova suggests that Romania lacked a distinctive national identity. She writes:

Assimilation, for example, is the lowest level of literary revolt, the obligatory itinerary for every apprentice writer from an impoverished region having no literary resources of its own – for example, a colonized area prior to the formation of a movement for independence or the proclamation of a distinctive national identity.<sup>59</sup>

This is a claim with which many Romanian scholars would disagree. Cioran left Romania for good in 1941. By coincidence, 1941 saw the publication of George Călinescu’s *The*

---

<sup>57</sup> Casanova, *The World*, p. 215.

<sup>58</sup> Bahun, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Casanova, *The World*, p. 207.

*History of Romanian Literature from the Origins to the Present Times*. By that time Romania had exported to Paris both Tristan Tzara and Eugène Ionesco, two writers who are strangely missing from Casanova's account. The impoverishment of Romanian culture was a fault of perception, due to internalized Eurocentrism. The journeys of the Romanian émigrés to Paris were as motivated by frustrations with Eurocentric cultural politics and resistance to Francophilia as they were by unequivocal admiration. It is the purpose of this thesis to fill in the silence about the "deeply impoverished" Romanian literary space and examine Tzara's and Ionesco's problematic affiliation to it.

## **6. Romanian Modernism**

Definitions and canons of modernism vary widely depending on the adopted focus, yet, as Susan Friedman points out, it has most often been associated with the hard core of Anglo-American experimental forms inspired by French Symbolism and informed by social and cultural modernity.<sup>60</sup> These innovative forms responded to the radical transformations brought about by the second industrial revolution (1870-1920) in terms of technological development (electrification, communication and mass production), urbanization and emergence of the bureaucratic nation-state. In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the collapse of the old Empires and the issue of independent national identity were modernity's most important coordinates. An important aspect of these newly emerging national identities and their literary productions was the preoccupation to catch up with Western Europe, which was viewed as emblematically modern.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Friedman, p. 500-01.

More inclusive accounts also acknowledge Western and Central European manifestations and Russian modernism. See Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism: A Guide To European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1976). Recent forays into non-Western modernisms have been included in Wollaeger and Eatough, *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*.

<sup>61</sup> Gerald Janecek, "Dada in Central and Eastern Europe", in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe and Japan*, ed. by Gerald Jenecek and Toshiharu Omuka (New York: Prentice Hall International, 1998), pp. 1-10 (p. 1). Tim Armstrong discusses nationalism in the context of Scottish, African-American and Native American "delayed modernisms" but not in relation to Eastern Europe.



This “sense of belatedness” experienced by East European artists was also adopted in critical assessments of their modernism.<sup>62</sup> Mary Gluck claims that cultural and art historians use Western categories to interpret East European art because East European artists themselves shaped their work and ambitions in relation to West European artistic concerns and movements.<sup>63</sup> “How are we to understand the nature of these hyphenated identities? How are we to think about the residue of otherness, inherent in the aesthetic manifestation of East European modernisms?” Gluck asks, brilliantly formulating the conceptual difficulties of envisaging non-Western modernisms.

In keeping with the Eurocentric model, Romanian modernism is generally understood as “belated” and “derivative”, partly because it perceived itself as such. Moreover, its manifestations have a different chronology and epistemology due to its distinct experience of modernity, more or less typical of Eastern Europe. As a young state recently emancipated from Ottoman control, Romania’s priority was to consolidate the national project and to catch up with Western modernity. The Romanian critic Sorin Alexandrescu describes Romanian modernity as a series of concatenated paradoxes. The liminality of its geography – as a buffer zone between the three empires – required a constant negotiation of imitation and resistance towards external influences. Romania’s anxiety of underdevelopment and the ensuing drive to catch up with Western modernity resulted in a jagged temporal framework whereby different cultural moments were quoted in eclectic simultaneity.

At the beginning of the twentieth-century, Alexandrescu shows, Symbolism co-habited with the avant-garde, realism, Proustian stream of consciousness, Gide’s confessional style and Urmuz’s absurdist prose. A third paradox is the incongruity between a predominant rural oral culture and an urban written culture which, apart from an ongoing cultural battle between modernists and traditionalists, triggered a split sensibility even in its most experimental artists. Tzara and Fondane, for example, explored rural themes despite their avant-garde proclivities. The nation-building efforts inspired by Western models, on the other hand, prompted a break with its Balkan feudal past. There were further splits between the political modernizing drive and a reactionary culture enchanted with the past.

---

<sup>62</sup> Bahun, p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Gluck “The Modernist as a Primitive: The Cultural Role of Endre Ady in Fin-de Siècle Hungary”, *Austrian History Yearbook*, 33 (2002), 149-62 (pp. 149-50).

Alexandrescu contends that the main endeavour of modern Romanian culture has been to reconcile its discrepancies.<sup>64</sup>

If in many cases, as Alexandrescu shows, Romanian modernism adapted Western forms – Bahun points out Symbolism’s inordinate impact on Eastern European modernism – in other cases, as with Tzara and Ionesco, there occurred aesthetic mutations which turn the Eurocentric logic on its head.<sup>65</sup> The imputed aesthetic derivativeness was by a strange alchemy projected forward into the avant-garde forms of Tzara and Ionesco, which brought Dada and the theatre of the absurd to the centre of Western modernity from the Romanian backwoods. This could be explained by what Marshall Berman called the “modernism of underdevelopment”, which – refuting the centre/periphery diffusion model – outdid in formal radicalism the central manifestations. Berman writes that an “extremely weird form of modernism” emerged in the antiquated Russian Empire, “the modernism of underdevelopment” which thrived on the incongruous juxtaposition of backwardness and modernization.<sup>66</sup> Berman advocates a culturally inclusive idea of modernism which cuts across different temporalities, geographies and communities and envisages solidarities between the politically divided Old, New and Third Worlds. Berman’s definition of modernism as an attempt by modern men “to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it” serves well the current critical efforts to expand the modernist canon.<sup>67</sup> This flexible temporal and aesthetic framework allows the inclusion of Romanian modernist manifestations which don’t fit the narrow normative canon of high modernism. Yet, Berman’s understanding of Russian modernism as “extremely weird” retains the normative direction of the critical gaze.

This thesis will test and complicate this hypothesis of modernist economy in relation to the Romanian context as illustrated by Tzara and Ionesco’s aesthetic projects, while attempting a decentred and multidirectional comparative framework. The challenge of a

---

<sup>64</sup> Alexandrescu, p. 11-13.

<sup>65</sup> Bahun, p. 42.

<sup>66</sup> Berman, p. 193. Like Berman, Andreas Huyssen and Fredric Jameson, among others, argue that the most experimental modernist forms were born in the political or geographical margins where modernity and more traditional systems clashed most violently. See Andreas Huyssen, “Geographies of Modernism”, *New German Critique*, 34 (2007), 189-207; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke UP, 1991), p. 307-10.

<sup>67</sup> Berman, pp. 5-6.

comparative modernist framework is not to resort to Eurocentric universalism while trying to avoid insularity and national prejudice. In view of recurrent attempts by right-wing and communist nationalists to imagine Romania as pure, homogenous and autochthonous, and repress or deny foreign influences, at times with disastrous consequences, this thesis will also avoid major or strong nationalist hermeneutic positions. The legacy of the Romanian communist regime is, among other things, a literary canon heavily inflected by nationalist bias.

As a reaction to nationalist extremism, Ionesco's estate, as I have shown, took a strong Francophone stance, and policed any critical attempts to integrate the playwright in the Romanian canon. Rather than mirror the strangely imbricated extremes of strong nationalism and Eurocentricism, which historically have been the alternatives for cultural politics in Romania, I propose a comparative hermeneutic based on a soft notion of national identity, in line with Sean Cotter's concept of minor national imagination.<sup>68</sup> This allows me to fully accommodate the complexities and contradictions of Romanian modernism, caught as it was between Western aspirations and local idiosyncrasies, and consolidate an alternative archive, independent of repressive nationalist narratives and Eurocentrism alike.

For this purpose, and drawing on Bruno Latour's reconceptualization of modernity, I suggest that cultural exchange and diffusion models within modernism should be conceptualized as "long networks" in which mediators are "actors endowed with the capacity to translate what they transport, to redefine it or to redeploy it, and also to betray it." Romanian modernism is, according to Latour's model, one of the mediators of modernist aesthetics, actively participating in its own making. The polytemporality, multiple agency and even distribution of essence characteristic of long networks allow the diversity and hybridity of modernism to become fully manifest without destabilizing the model. The system's flexible, episodic and scattered nature does not espouse fixed hierarchies, instead constantly reshuffling and reinterpreting its elements. An important ramification of Latour's

---

<sup>68</sup> Pheng Cheah advocates inclusive and tolerant ideas of belonging to a certain cultural space as viable "forms of consciousness". See "Introduction Part II: The Cosmopolitical Today", in *Cosmopolitics : Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 20-41 (p. 31).

compensatory theory is that by challenging modernity's normative myths of progress and order, it restores modernism to agents so far excluded from its nomenclature.<sup>69</sup>

## 7. Romania and the Avant-Garde

As iconic exponents of the historical avant-garde and, at least in part, products of a Romanian historical context, Tzara and Ionesco can modify the terms of both modernist and avant-garde theories. In some accounts, the avant-garde has been understood loosely as an undercurrent of formal experimentalism starting from Romanticism and traversing modernism to become the prevailing aesthetic of modern art. This approach adopted first by Renato Poggioli and then developed in a more focused discussion of modernism by Matei Calinescu and Marjorie Perloff, conflates the avant-garde with experimentalism, making it difficult to identify and distinguish both in terms of timeframe and style.<sup>70</sup> The avant-garde and modernism, are on these accounts, almost interchangeable, or rather avant-garde is a descriptive term for modernism's most radical experiments, making it difficult to justify why the avant-garde is a prerogative of modernism and would not include earlier innovative works by, say, Lawrence Sterne or Jonathan Swift.

By ascribing a particular historical context and an overtly political motivation to what he termed "the historical avant-gardes", Peter Bürger was able to endow them with historical and aesthetic specificity. The historical avant-gardes, in his account, started with Expressionism and Futurism and ebbed out with Surrealism, Dadaism being their emblematic embodiment. What differentiates the historical avant-gardes from other instances of formal innovation, Bürger argues, is their programmatic attack on the institution of art and the injunction to reintegrate art it into the praxis of life, as a reaction to the increasing insularity and political acquiescence of *fin de siècle* aestheticism. Bürger fixed the avant-garde within the temporal and aesthetic ambit of modernism (*genus proximum*) while

---

<sup>69</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1991), pp. 75-6, 81.

<sup>70</sup> See Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1968), Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant-guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

at the same time positing its specific difference (*differentia specifica*), thus defining it as a literary-critical category.

However, if fundamental for the ontology of the avant-garde, Bürger's theory relies entirely on a Eurocentric chronology whereby a relatively autonomous institution of art was in place by the end of the eighteenth century followed, a century later, by the complete social and political insulation of aestheticism which the avant-garde sought to reverse.<sup>71</sup> In this, Bürger overlooks non-Western artistic histories and practices which, as in Tzara's and Ionesco's case, might have had a bearing on avant-garde aesthetics. Romania's case does not accommodate Bürger's thesis. A young nation-state and a precarious democracy under King Carol I, imported from Germany, meant that Romanian aesthetic modernity did not enjoy the autonomy condemned by the avant-garde in Bürger's account. On the contrary, in the context of a strong nationalist bias for traditionalist aesthetics, the fierce resistance to modernist literature triggered Symbolism's radicalization, politicization and rapprochement with left-wing ideology.

Drawing on Peter Hanak's examination of Hungarian modernism, Gluck suggests a unique East European model of modernist culture, which modifies Bürger's assumptions. Because strongly attached to emerging civil societies, she contends, Eastern European modernism took different, more organic forms whereby aesthetics and ideology were inextricably bound up. In stark opposition to the political withdrawal of Viennese aestheticism, Hungarian modernism issued from a budding urban culture deeply anchored in the national public life and retained, hence, a strong collective dimension.<sup>72</sup> More recently, Sascha Bru focusing mostly on German, Belgian and Italian contexts has linked the radical experimentation of the avant-gardes to the unstable European democracies of the 1910s and 1920s, arguing that attempts at political encroachment violated art's autonomy rather than artists themselves recoiling against their own insularity. It was the political trauma which triggered the radicalization of literature, Bru proffers.<sup>73</sup> Confirming Gluck's and Bru's models, national and political considerations weighed heavily on Romanian modernism and motivated the aesthetic mutations which produced Tzara's and Ionesco's forms.

---

<sup>71</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984), pp. 17, 26-7.

<sup>72</sup> Gluck, pp. 150-51.

<sup>73</sup> Sascha Bru, *Democracy, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), pp. 4-5.

## 8. Revisiting Tzara and Ionesco

A series of recent studies on the Romanian avant-garde opened the way for the reintegration of Tristan Tzara and Eugène Ionesco in the local literary scene. Most notably, Tom Sandqvist's *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* places Tzara and the Janco brothers in a Romanian historical and artistic context. Although it productively indicates illuminating continuities between Symbolism, the avant-garde and left wing activism, it stops short of thoroughly investigating the formal aspects of this exchange and its full implications. Furthermore Sandqvist's research, mainly historical and descriptive – it is a cultural history more than anything else – does not attempt a realignment of modernist theory with the new facts it unravels.

Likewise, Paul Cernat's *Avangarda Românească și Complexul Periferiei* [The Romanian Avant-Garde and the Complex of the Margins] is an incredibly well documented review of the Romanian avant-garde.<sup>74</sup> It takes the reader through Romanian post-symbolism, the Romanian reception of Marinetti's futurism, the first avant-garde attempts, all the way to the full-blown neo-Dada of *Contimporanul* [The Contemporary] and the Surrealist *Unu* [One], *Punct* [Full-Stop] and *Integral*. Attention is given to the marginality complex, which conditioned the Romanian modernist output, the important Jewish contributions to Romanian avant-garde and the Romanian genealogy of the absurd. It does not however attempt to unravel the social and political content encoded in the aesthetic of the absurd, nor contest the West-centric modernist paradigm. While the study is insightful, Cernat's analysis does not go beyond an eclectic and encyclopedically comprehensive introduction to the Romanian avant-garde. Adriana Varga's chapter on Tzara and Ionesco in *The Avant-Garde and the Margin* perhaps comes closest to the aims of this thesis, identifying some of the important concerns I am pursuing: the affinities between Ionesco and Caragiale, literary marginality and the imbalances inherent in cultural traffic.<sup>75</sup> These are

---

<sup>74</sup> Paul Cernat, *Avangarda Românească și Complexul Periferiei* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2007).

<sup>75</sup> Adriana Varga, "Periphery to Center and Back: Exploring Dada and the Absurd in the Context of Romanian Literary Traditions", in *Avant-Garde and the Margin: New Territories of Modernism*, ed. by Sanja Bahun-Radunovic and Marinos Pourgouris (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), pp. 129-53.

welcome additions to a topic undeservedly neglected, which prompted Sanja Bahun to conclude that the Romanian one is the most visible of the Balkan modernisms.<sup>76</sup>

This thesis extends the ambit of research both vertically and horizontally, excavating on the one hand new sources like, for example, Caragiale's journalistic career, the staging of his play "Căldura Mare" [*Les Grandes Chaleurs*] in Paris as part of *Spectacle Ionesco*, close readings of Tzara's magazines *Simbolul* [The Symbol] and *Chemarea* [The Calling], and the left-wing journals with which they were affiliated, a reading of the aesthetic problems posed by Ionesco in *Nu*; and understanding, on the other hand, these formal endeavors as part of a larger critical reaction to Romanian modernity and its specific problems. I read Ionesco's absurdist oeuvre as part of the ironic tradition of social criticism initiated by the first cultural commentators of modern Romania and established as a full-blown mode by *Junimea*. Significantly, Ionesco started his career as *l'enfant terrible* of Romanian criticism before his exile in France. An admirer of Maiorescu's critical spirit, Ionesco took his humour and caustic wit to new nonconformist heights in his articles collected in *Război cu toată lumea* [War with Everybody] and particularly in *Nu* [No].<sup>77</sup> Ionesco's theatre, on the other hand, reworks Caragiale's exploration of linguistic distortion and epistemological crisis in an avant-gardist vein. Similarly, I show that the Romanian avant-garde was inspired by Maiorescu's critique of empty forms and Caragiale's dramatization of empty phraseology. I, furthermore, trace the radical aesthetics of the Dada manifestos by looking at Tzara's attachment to a tradition of left-wing social critique and the unusual rapprochement between Romanian Symbolism and left-wing activism. This, in turn, explains Tzara's unlikely transition from the neosymbolism of *Primele Poeme* to the radical iconoclasm of the Dadaist manifestos, and his conversion to communism during the Second World War.

The emphasis is both cultural-historical and formalist in following the material cultural transformations, on the one hand, and their reflection in the development of literary forms, on the other.<sup>78</sup> Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's and Homi Bhabha's critical theories,

---

<sup>76</sup> Bahun, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> Ionesco, *Război cu Toată Lumea: Publicistică Românească*, 2 vols. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992).

<sup>78</sup> In its double focus, my reading combines close reading strategies and contextual/historical awareness, thus aspiring to what Susan J. Wolfson has termed "activist formalism". See "Reading for Form", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61 (2000), 1-16 (p.2) and Marjorie Levinson, "What is New Formalism?", *PMLA*, 122 (2007), 558-569 (p. 559).

this thesis adopts an intertextual reading, exploring the dialogic aspect of these texts' formal inflections and envisaging a dynamic and socially situated concept of "tradition" or "influence".<sup>79</sup> The inter-texts selected for Tzara's and Ionesco's texts are previous discursive articulations of the nation as well as their social and political contexts. My choice of discursive inter-texts is most often dictated by the production and reception circumstances of primary texts, as is the case with Ionesco's reading and staging of Caragiale and Tzara's editorial work at *Simbolul* and *Chemarea* or *Nu*'s reprise of *Junimea*'s critique. Illustrations of magazine covers and print facsimiles complement textual analyses to guide the reader through archival materials where the visual impacts the production and reception of the textual.

Apart from enriching the global modernist archive with new texts and contexts, this thesis will contribute to the reconfiguration of its paradigm. As Chana Kronfeld argues, "marginal" modernist breakthroughs such as Tzara's and Ionesco's may serve to refute the centre/periphery diffusion model, and "deconstruct the major through the minor" by exploding "the mystified notion of a unified canonical modernism".<sup>80</sup> Moreover, an understanding of Romanian modernism and its transnational enclaves changes the ways we read modernism as a whole by recuperating aspects which were overlooked or misinterpreted. The Romanian context modifies both the premises of avant-garde theory and the customary perceptions of symbolist aesthetics. Separation from life and detachment from political concerns has so far been considered central to symbolist conceptions, as Richard Candida Smith and A.G. Lehmann show.<sup>81</sup> This is the working hypothesis of Bürger's avant-garde theory. Julia Kristeva reads symbolist innovation as a form of protest against repressive social structures but does not acknowledge any contextual connections with the political realm, suggesting rather that any artistic experimentalism is by implication political

---

<sup>79</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas UP, 1981). Although Kristeva was the first to articulate a theory of intertextuality inspired by Bakhtin's dialogism, her exclusive emphasis on textuality to the detriment of context and authorship/subjecthood does not serve well the purposes of my thesis, which is particularly invested in questions of nation and identity. See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 155, 160-64.

<sup>80</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: California UP, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> See A.G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France: 1885-1895* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), p. 14, and Richard Candida Smith, *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (Berkeley: California UP, 1999), p. xiv.



in its ability to undermine accepted meaning.<sup>82</sup> The rapprochement between left-wing ideology and symbolist forms in Romania therefore invites a revision of the Symbolist canon, which for purposes of homogenous systematization foregrounds certain features and ignores others from the hazy outline of the literary movement, according to criteria that are always historically situated. Lehmann, for example, admits that he left out of his overview threads of political radicalism in some individual French poets and the symbolist magazines *Le Décadent* and *Entretiens*.<sup>83</sup> More recent research by Debarati Sanyal has examined Baudelaire's political activism and its traces in the ironic dimensions of his texts.<sup>84</sup> These disclosures and critical forays point to a repressed political dimension of Symbolism which becomes manifest in Romania.<sup>85</sup>

Because the nation-building process and the ambivalent relationship with French culture are important premises of Romanian modernism, I start with a chapter which tracks the coordinates of local modernity. The political and cultural elites educated in France envisaged a modern Romania divorced from its Ottoman Balkan past. Around 1848, they imported the French Revolution together with its ideals and forms, and set upon inventing the nation. But the long history of political domination and cultural crossovers refused to yield to homogenizing ambitions, be they in the form of linguistic purges, urban development or cultural conditioning. The clash between Western modernity and the Balkan feudal world, manifest at all levels of national life, frustrated progress and troubled identity narratives. It was foremost epistemologically and aesthetically challenging to articulate an identity ridden with contradictions, inconsistencies and excesses.

As language and literature were the privileged vehicles of writing the nation, the cultural discrepancy had also to be expressed aesthetically. Painfully aware of the cultural rift, cultural critics and writers mediated the paradoxes and incongruities of Romanian modernity by employing irony. The practice was so pervasive in the second half of the

---

<sup>82</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (Minnesota: Minnesota UP, 1996), pp. 164-65; and Candida Smith, pp. xvi-xix.

<sup>83</sup> See Lehmann, p. 16.

<sup>84</sup> See Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> For a Marxist reading of the repressed politics of post-revolutionary French letters, see Dolf Oehler, *Le Spleen Contre L'Oubli. Juin 1848: Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen*, trans. by Guy Petidmange (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1996).

nineteenth-century, that cultural historian Rădulescu-Motru came up with the term *zeflemea* to criticize the condescending irreverence with which the elites educated abroad wrote of local realities as if from the height of Western standards.<sup>86</sup> Irony articulated the distances between the disjointed selves of the nation, between its Western form and Balkan content. That Rădulescu-Motru chose *zeflemea* – a word of Ottoman etymology – to criticize the condescending irony of young Romanian intellectuals educated in the West is highly ironic. It illustrates the pervasiveness of *zeflemea* which entered the back door of academic discourse and remained the modus operandi of cultural debates during Romanian modernism. I trace the seeds of the absurd in these early manifestations of stylistic irreverence and in a tradition of criticism which enacts cultural incongruities at a formal level. Particularly relevant is Titu Maiorescu’s critique of “empty cultural forms” and “inebriation with words” which provides an uncanny anticipation of Tzara’s and Ionesco’s radical aesthetics.

Chapter Two follows the explosive expansion of Romanian media culture during the second half of the nineteenth-century and the critical reaction to what was perceived as a “kitsch” ontology deriving from it. I trace the origins of the Romanian avant-garde in this practice which diverts the sources of the mass culture towards a wholesale critique of modernity. I explore the surprising affinities between Ionesco and his compatriot Ion Luca Caragiale, the far less iconoclastic father of modern Romanian theatre. I discuss the inclusion of Caragiale’s sketch “Căldura Mare” [Les Grandes Chaleurs] in *Spectacle Ionesco* staged by Théâtre de la Huchette in August 1953. Ionesco’s reading of Caragiale in the preface to his translation of the sketch directs attention to the latter’s extensive journalistic career which informed his innovative theatre. On the one hand, Caragiale captured the cultural and epistemological effects of mass media in the disarticulated speech of his characters which so presciently foretold Ionesco’s. On the other, his ambivalent engagement with the newspaper culture - particularly his editorship of the anti-paper *Claponul. Foiță Hazlie și Populară* [The Capon. Funny and Popular Slip] – anticipated Dada practice by hijacking its strategies in order to more effectively subvert it. Caragiale’s critique of kitsch, the politicisation of language and bourgeois decorum, in both his theatre and the reviews he edited, evinces aesthetic and ideological concerns which became paramount for the avant-garde.

---

<sup>86</sup> Rădulescu-Motru, p. 1.

Chapter Three documents Tzara's affiliation to a Romanian tradition of left-wing radicalism in order to examine the unlikely transition from the neo-symbolism of his early poems to the radical iconoclasm of the Dada manifestos. In their quest for new artistic and social forms, the Romanian left-wing publications *Facla* [The Beacon], *Viața Socială* [Social Life] and *Adevărul* [The Truth] endorsed the progressive modernist aesthetics of the symbolist-cum-avant-gardist reviews edited by Tzara during his Romanian years. This unlikely alliance was prompted by political pressure and fierce criticism from the traditionalist *Sămănătorul* group which viewed both Marxism and Symbolist aesthetics as detrimental to the national cause. I read the exchanges between the two factions in order to trace the discursive radicalization and the aesthetic mutation at work in Romanian symbolism.

My comparative reading reveals important ideological and aesthetic affinities between the modernist socialist reviews and Tzara's pre-avant-garde magazines *Simbolul* [The Symbol] and *Chemarea* [The Call]. The former used rhetoric and editorial strategies very similar to those employed by Tzara in his manifestos and editions of the Dada magazines. The uncanny concatenation of Marxist ideology and experimental form espoused by the Romanian modernist left set the aesthetic coordinates of Tzara's transnational career. Whereas previous critical forays into Tzara's Romanian period looked for illuminating continuities in his early poetry, I show that the left-wing journalistic practices, which infiltrated *Simbolul* and *Chemarea* are more relevant for a Dadaist genealogy and a better understanding of its aesthetic implications. The puzzling combination of absurd prose, catchy rhetoric, foul language and anti-bourgeois provocations which make the signature of the Dada manifesto, is an ingenious reconfiguration of the aesthetic and ideological tenets of the Romanian modernist left.

The final chapter is dedicated to Ionesco's book-length essay *Nu*, which I read as an *ars poetica* in a nutshell both formally and topically. Ionesco's later numerous memoirs simply reiterate and develop the concerns, local and historical as well as existential, he dwells on, while his plays formally play out the aesthetic questions he poses in *Non*. It is also a book strongly anchored in the Romanian cultural context and apart from the strong avant-garde refutation of Romania's literary tradition, it registers Ionesco's attachment to this culture and the role it played in the shaping of his aesthetics. I place *Nu*'s transgressive style – a combination of coffee-shop banter and irreverent personal attack – in the tradition of cultural critique initiated decades earlier by Ionesco's favourite critic Titu Maiorescu, which

reached Ionesco via the Romanian avant-garde. As with his predecessors, radical irony accommodates Ionesco's ambivalent attachment to his local culture and the irreconcilable paradoxes of Romanian modernity.

In *Nu*, the playwright makes the first steps from discursive speculation on the aesthetic dimension of national identity and the cultural complexes of young Romania, to enacting these anxieties at a formal level. The local issues present in *Nu*, but absent from Ionesco's later writings because no longer relevant in the French context, were nevertheless embedded in the aesthetics of his theatre which dramatizes Romania's identity qualms as an existential crisis. The theatre of the absurd, I argue, emerged as a formal solution to one of the most important concerns in *Nu*: Romania's aesthetic specificity. If, as the playwright writes, neither cosmopolitan Symbolism nor the rural ethos of Sămănătorism can capture the essence of a Romanian identity, what else is there specifically Romanian other than the insecure rumination about identity which Ionesco himself exercises in his pamphlet and the maddening blabber of his characters?

An aesthetic of the absurd is not easy to pinpoint, and nor do Tzara's and Ionesco's radical forms converge entirely. The two writers are twenty years apart. They habituated different circles and circulated different aesthetic orbits. Even though some of Tzara's fellow avant-gardists were still going strong in the Romanian Surrealist group, Ionesco was not interested. By that time Surrealism had lost its international appeal and the playwright was in search of the next big thing. His 1934 book *Nu*, if obviously inspired by their subversive aesthetics and unorthodox practices, is suspiciously oblivious of the Romanian avant-garde. Ionesco either unquestioningly accepted its segregation from the canon, or was anxious that any association might take away from the originality of his project. What united them was an undercurrent of shared preoccupations and styles, which converge in a Romanian tradition of hypercriticism. It is almost as if the local historical context prompted the emergence of a new aesthetic mode to articulate its contradictions, inconsistencies and excesses.

Tzara and Ionesco also share a predilection for performative forms, which might well be grounded in that same local context. Due to topical and disciplinary limitations, I do not engage with the performative aspects of Tzara's and Ionesco's work, focusing instead on the performativity of style and language. I note in passing, however, the hypothesis that Tzara's and Ionesco's aesthetics were influenced by the oral character of culture, low literacy rates and the pronounced political dimension of literature in Romania, that

performance is better placed to address. Apart from the strong anti-theatrical bias typical of modernism, which Ionesco reiterated in his subversion of the genre, as Martin Puchner shows, theatre and performance are also forms with strong political impact.<sup>87</sup> This latter aspect suited Tzara's and Ionesco's artistic projects which, being grounded in the Romanian historical context, necessarily have strong political undertones, even if, as in Ionesco's case, only to resist the politicization of art. Matei Călinescu, for example, suggests that Ionesco's catchy dialogues owe something to the oral expressivity of Romanian language and its predilection for pun and aphorisms.<sup>88</sup> Călinescu's observation also applies to Tzara's manifestos, whose catchy lines and overturned aphorisms are legendary.

By following the modulations and radicalization of irony as a function of increased cultural reflexivity, this thesis recuperates the opaque content crystallized in Tzara's and Ionesco's avant-garde forms. My reading of the absurd as an aesthetic reconciliation of the intractable aporias of Romanian modernity attempts to correct the cultural mistranslations that come with Tzara's and Ionesco's transnationalism. Whereas Martin Esslin linked the theatre of the absurd to preoccupations and anxieties of the Western world, as theorists of the avant-garde have done with Dada, I read Tzara's and Ionesco's forms as representations, responses and enactment of the complicated narrative of Romanian modernity and its identity anxieties.<sup>89</sup> The clash between civilizations and temporalities, which marked Romanian modernity, made Romanian artists more self-aware. The defamiliarization occasioned by the transplantation of Western forms to Romanian soil prompted their "grotesque vision", as Caragiale's text illustrates. "I feel enormously and I see monstrously", laments one of Caragiale's characters.<sup>90</sup> The rootlessness or homelessness, which Esslin ascribes to a Western modernist sensibility, was compounded by identity qualms in the case of Romanian writers. Without claiming that absurdism originated in Romania, in either its Dadaist or theatre of the absurd forms, I argue nevertheless that Romania made an important contribution to the European avant-garde.

---

<sup>87</sup> See Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore : The John Hopkins UP), p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> See Matei Călinescu, *Eugène Ionesco: Teme Identitare si Existentiale* [Eugène Ionesco: Existential and Identity Themes] (Iasi: Junimea, 2006), p. 119.

<sup>89</sup> See Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin, 1961).

<sup>90</sup> I.L. Caragiale, *Nuvele si Povestiri* [Novellas and Short Stories] (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1947), p. 205.

## Chapter 2: The Nation and the Absurd: A Romanian Story of Modernity

“Oh words, what crimes are committed in your name?”<sup>1</sup>

A product of modernity itself, literary Romania, virtually unknown heretofore, entered the European cultural scene by way of its vibrant avant-garde. Tristan Tzara, Constantin Brancusi, Gherasim Luca, Benjamin Fondane, and Eugène Ionesco are some of the Romanians who fashioned the vagrant European avant-garde, which was mobilized by the liberating modernity of Paris. Yet of their origins, of the less fashionable Romanian modernism from which they emerged, of their journeys from exotic Romania to the capital of the world republic of letters, we know little. Michael Impey’s provocative proposition that an important source for Dada/Surrealist and absurdist aesthetics originates in Romania remains largely unexplored.<sup>2</sup> Why was Romania such fertile soil for the absurd linguistic provocations of the avant-garde?

Eugène Ionesco’s 1959 portrait of Romanian playwright I. L. Caragiale offers a very useful key to opening the convoluted and as yet obscure story of the “regional context” that proved so propitious for the aesthetic of the absurd:

If we examine things more closely, and first of all in their regional context, they look even worse. Emerging from the Middle Ages of the Balkans, which had stretched on into the middle of the last century in the provinces of Romania, the country staggered straight into the liberal Europe. Rapid reforms gave the nation a new social structure; a bourgeois class sprang up from nowhere; the petit bourgeois appeared, a tradesman wearing the uniform of a civic guard, identical to his French colleague and the universal petit bourgeois, but still more stupid. . . . Their ignorance was more complex. Understanding nothing about historical evolution, even the least fortunate of these worthy citizens still had a kind of ambition to understand something, but without success: Caragiale shows us this mental effort too, collapsing under the strain, in all its distressing glory.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Jack or the Submission*, in Ionesco, *Four Plays*, trans. by Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Impey, pp. 131-32.

<sup>3</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writing on the Theatre*, trans. by Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), pp.140-41.

Ion Luca Caragiale (1852–1912) is Romania’s most famous playwright. His characters and memorable lines are often quoted in the most diverse contexts to describe the state of Romanian society or simply for the irresistible witticism of the language. Ionesco’s admiration for and emulation of Caragiale is no longer a cause for surprise to specialists of Romanian literature, but it is perhaps less known to critics of Ionesco unfamiliar with the Romanian context of his work. Still, the force of Ionesco’s description is striking even for the specialized reader who expects a strong affinity between the two playwrights. In “Portrait of Caragiale,” it is as though Caragiale’s “cretins” might be about to metamorphose into the disoriented aliens of one of Ionesco’s own plays, “collapsing under the strain” to understand what can no longer be understood after the complete divorce between meaning and sound. The text enacts an existential confusion between Caragiale and Ionesco himself, providing an illuminating account of absurdist ontology:

Caragiale’s heroes are mad about politics. They are political cretins. So much so that they have deformed their most everyday speech. The whole population feeds on the newspapers: written by idiots, they are read by idiots. The distortion of language, the obsession with politics is so great that all life’s actions are bathed in a bizarre eloquence consisting of expressions as high-sounding as they are miraculously inept, gathered from an inexhaustible storehouse of the most arrant nonsense, which serves as a noble justification for actions that are unspeakable.<sup>4</sup>

This argument not only introduces Ionesco’s interest in Caragiale, it also points to a history so far neglected but nevertheless relevant for a deeper understanding of Ionesco’s work. Existing studies often focus on Ionesco’s rejection of Romanian culture, tracing, for example, the direct genealogy of *Rhinoceros* in Romanian anti-Semitism, without sufficiently investigating the circumstances of that rejection or more inclusively analysing the political context of Ionesco’s forms.<sup>5</sup> Gelu Ionescu identified the critical continuity between Caragiale, literary critic Titu Maiorescu and Eugène Ionesco, in terms of their oppositional stance, but the conceptual and formal affinities have not been explored so far.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, pp. 140-41.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev, *La Jeunesse Littéraire d’Eugène Ionesco* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993); Deborah B. Gaensbauer, *Eugène Ionesco Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), pp. 18-26; Ann Halloway Quinney; and Adriana Varga, pp. 129-53.

Ionesco's professed affinities with Caragiale and the problems he flags introduce a new dimension to his aesthetics. This chapter sets out to "examine things more closely" and to elaborate on the issues raised by Ionesco about Romania's abrupt transition to modernity, its legendary Francophilia, the collapse of republican values, and the degeneration of language so skilfully captured in his plays.

### **1. An Abrupt, Francophone Modernity**

Romania's hasty modernization was understandably baffling both to nostalgic locals and to condescending visitors. An American journalist encountered the recently Westernized and modernized Bucharest of 1915 with haughty stupefaction:

To look at it all you would imagine that Bucharest was as ancient as Sofia or Belgrade. The white stone weathers so swiftly under the hot, dry sun, the rich oily soil bears such mellowing abundance of vegetation, life is so complex and sophisticated—yet thirty years ago there was nothing here but a wretched village, some old churches, and an old monastery, which was the seat of a princely family. Bucharest is a get-rich city, and modern Rumanian civilization is like that—a mushroom growth of thirty years.<sup>6</sup>

John Reed's account is deliberately exaggerated in the romanticized-bluff style of the journalistic travelogue. Bucharest is a Wild East befitting adventurous exaggerations and caricatures. His depiction is nonetheless, in the manner of all caricatures, truthful: it makes a point. Modernity arrived abruptly in Romania. But the complicated and eventful thirty years that produced modern Romania also belie Reed's sensationalist account. Romania's troubled history of subjection and occupation in a political arena disputed by the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires makes the sudden transition an achievement rather than a joke.

The haphazard modern Romania depicted by Reed was the result of an elaborate plan concocted by the Romanian principalities with a view to cajoling or coercing the European powers into recognizing their union and independence. The unionists managed to circumvent the European powers' reluctance to endorse a move that would antagonize the Turkish Empire by electing the same governor in both provinces in 1861. This political

---

<sup>6</sup> John Reed and Boardman Robinson, *The War in Eastern Europe* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. 298.



move was further consolidated in 1866, when the local boyars invited the German prince Karl von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a Prussian officer, to rule the united Principalities.

These political events were accompanied by radical cultural transformations. Between 1821 and 1866, Moldavia and Wallachia – Ottoman provinces culturally anchored in the Balkans – became a country of Western outlook and French allegiance. As historian Lucian Boia remarks, the process of modernization changed “not only the political foundations of the Romanians but also the foundations of Romanian civilization.” In a few decades, Romanians exchanged their “oriental” clothes and manners for French clothes and manners, the Cyrillic alphabet for Latin letters. This was a complete transfiguration: “From the Balkans, Romania suddenly oriented itself towards the Western world”.<sup>7</sup> Boia’s assessment of this change as radical and rapid confirms Ionesco depiction of Romania staggering into Europe. But “staggering” also suggests the makeshift nature of this transition. What is more interesting is what triggered Romania’s entry into Europe.

In or around 1848, one of the most important social and political developments of modernity was exported to Eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> The progressive ideas of the French Revolution were moving eastward and found fertile ground in disenfranchised communities. It was the breeze of modernity coming from the West that carried with it the promise of a modern independent Romanian state. “We are, dear Sir, in an era and mood when, if we can, we should not allow anything to dally,” the Romanian intellectual Ioan Heliade Rădulescu prompted in an 1836 letter to fellow writer Constantin Negruzzi.<sup>9</sup> Suddenly it seemed possible that the Romanian principalities could be united in a single sovereign state that would bring together a population with the same culture and language. As John C. Campbell shows, such political ideas and projects, rather than industrialization, were the driving forces of modernization in south-eastern Europe. From its beginnings, Romanian modernity was inextricably linked to nationalism.

---

<sup>7</sup> Lucian Boia, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Monica Spiridon, p.150.

<sup>9</sup> Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, quoted in Sorin Adam Matei, *Boierii Mintii: Intelectualii Romani Intre Grupurile de Prestigiu si Piata Libera a Ideilor* [The Boyars of the Mind: Romanian Intellectuals between Prestige Groups and the Free Market of Ideas] (Bucharest: Compania, 2004), p. 59. My translation.

A professor at St. Sava—where Ionesco would later study—and the author of one of the first Romanian grammars, Rădulescu was a prominent cultural activist between 1834 and 1848, during which time the nationalist movement expanded and consolidated its agenda.

At the same time, the new nation also offered an opportunity to reshape “the world” according to new principles, ideals, and allegiances. The two currents of Western thought which penetrated the Romanian principalities and combined to shape a peculiar brand of nationalism, were the Enlightenment ideas cherished by the French Revolution and the Romantic vision of nationalism. In Romania, this meant a break with the models and influences of the past—and particularly with Russian and Greek models—and a realignment with the modern and liberal West and especially France. By virtue of a complex set of circumstances, admiration for the “great Latin sister” was to become crucial in the shaping of a national identity. Boia contends that “the relationship with France, a case of love at first sight, became an obsession, holding the Romanians in its thrall for more than a century”.<sup>10</sup> Ionesco’s use of the French model as a term of reference is intrinsically relevant, then, and not only because he is introducing Caragiale to a French audience. It is a term of comparison embedded in the history and identity of a culture that was modelling itself after French culture. Ionesco’s adoption of France as his second country is not an isolated instance, and it is more than a typically modern intellectual migration towards an effervescent and iconic Paris. Rather, it is symptomatic of Romania’s cultural indebtedness to “la France éternelle”.

The widespread emulation of French culture was more than a whim of fashion. The standardization of the Romanian language, part of the centralizing efforts of the nation-state, entailed a massive importation of neologisms from French, some of them replacing or supplementing older lexemes of Slavic or Turkish origin. Forty percent of modern Romanian is of French derivation, an aspect all the more striking in “intellectual” discourse, which imitates the French idiom both syntactically and lexically.<sup>11</sup> An overwhelming proportion of the books imported in the principalities throughout the nineteenth century were French. For a very brief period in 1847, French actually became the official language of instruction in both Moldavia and Wallachia, as it was believed that Romanian was a primitive language incapable of expressing sophisticated concepts and ideas and inadequate for superior schools or advanced subjects.<sup>12</sup> And as Boia points out, French was “more than a language of communication or of culture,” it was also a gateway to a new “soul”—a French soul,

---

<sup>10</sup> Boia, p. 83. See also John C. Campbell, *French Influence and the Rise of Romanian Nationalism: The Generation of 1848 (1830-1857)* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Boia, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, pp. 93-94.

presumably. What was the nature of this very strong attachment to French culture, and what triggered it?

John C. Campbell attributes the first contact with French language and manners to the Phanariot princes who were Greek diplomats from the Phanar neighbourhood in Constantinople that the Ottoman Porte appointed Princes of the Principalities between 1711/16-1821. As the language of diplomacy in the Near East was French, the Phanariots hired French secretaries and tutors for their offspring. They often amassed impressive libraries containing French works. Russian officers mediated another significant contact during the Russian occupation of 1828-29, bringing over the French tone of St. Petersburg society in more worldly matters like dances and card games.<sup>13</sup> Yet Campbell stresses that “the more solid elements of culture, books, periodicals and newspapers, came by way of Vienna [...] a traffic encouraged by the Phanariot princes”.<sup>14</sup> The influence was reinforced by the cultural reputation of France. “Because France was the unquestioned fountain-head of intellectual endeavour in the eighteenth century, the penetration of European ideas into areas which had formerly been wholly in the sphere of Asiatic or Byzantine civilization meant the penetration of French ideas”, Campbell writes. This was, in other words, a cultural identification with Europe against the Ottoman legacy.

As the independence movement gained momentum in the principalities at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, this cultural identification took on political overtones. The French Revolution played a significant role in the awakening of a political awareness in the area. News of the revolution travelled through merchants and fascinated the local boyars. They assimilated its “revolutionary phraseology”, if not its radical democratic ideas.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, they hoped Napoleon would take an interest in the area and become “the future liberator of all oppressed peoples”.<sup>16</sup> Although this wishful representation failed to prove fruitful, Romanians continued to eagerly follow his career and to hope that his great influence would in some way benefit them. French political prestige reinforced the influence and reputation of its thought and literature. Apart from revolutionary ideas, French books,

---

<sup>13</sup> Boia, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> Campbell, pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Campbell, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Campbell, p. 21.

newspapers, clothes, wines and luxury articles were very popular in the cities of the principalities, which were reproducing/emulating Paris at a smaller scale.

The particular political status of the principalities allowed these affinities to flourish. The fact that Moldavia and Wallachia maintained a degree of independence from the Ottoman Porte permitted the preservation of a local aristocracy with a fairly independent intellectual life which could develop a taste for French letters.<sup>17</sup> The Romanian principalities could thus aspire to break the cultural and political domination of its aggressive neighbours by seeking cultural patronage and recognition from the West. Their attachment to French culture and political ideas was both a diplomatic move and a fashionable bias. The association with a political power located far enough not to pose any threat, was a beneficial patronage for a young (aspiring) state eager to shape its future on modern lines. France in its turn, as Sanja Bahun notes, was interested to supplant Russia's political dominance in the area.<sup>18</sup>

The cultural reputation of France combined with the strong linguistic kinship between Romanian and French to create a strong and long-lasting French influence in Moldavia and Wallachia. The young Romanian intelligentsia was imbued with French culture in a variety of ways: in the French schools opened by Vaillant and Cuenim in Bucharest, via French publications that exported the salons of the French aristocracy, and through direct participation in Paris's *vie mondaine*.<sup>19</sup> Efforts to create a modern native literature were also stimulated by hypnotic encounters with French literature. Translations of French works, very popular in the decades before independence, introduced Western modernity to the "primitive" Romanian language. While not of intrinsic literary merit, Campbell points out, these linguistic exercises were "the first trickle of what was to become an ever-broadening river carrying the Romanians away from a static oriental existence into the main stream of Western civilization".<sup>20</sup> In the absence of original indigenous productions, modern literary Romania was formed in apprenticeship mode through French translations. Along with the structures of the French language, it was seen to acquire by osmosis what might be termed an ineffable French soul. In this specific sense, Romanian

---

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Bahun, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Matei, *Boierii Mintii*, p. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, p. 14.

literature seemed always a translation of an “untranslatable,” ideal French. Accordingly, Ionesco’s literary journey can be read as an inevitable transgression of the power tension between original and copy, a much-coveted access to the real thing. This historical background foreshadows the beginnings of a linguistic absurdism that fed into Ionesco’s aesthetics.

Most importantly, the mimetic tendencies peaked after 1830, when French education became standard for the local aristocracy. Young Romanians educated in French boarding schools and Romanian lycées completed their studies in Paris and were initiated into French revolutionary thinking. There, they assimilated the radical ideas of the democratic-republicans Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet, who were giving spectacular lectures at the College de France. Michelet and Quinet advocated the nationality principle and a social mysticism which invested men with the heroic power to resurrect history and put in place a political system free of abuses and injustice. Amongst their most devoted partisans were Eastern European supporters of national emancipation who coordinated the 1848 revolutionary movements in their home countries. The ideals of “la France éternelle” propounded by Michelet and Quinet extended over the physical boundaries of France and into eastern-central Europe, inspiring and sustaining the political movements which came to be known as “The Spring of Nations”.

This political vision offered the theoretical basis for national emancipation in the principalities as well. Monica Spiridon argues this was the moment when a local identity emerged and the cultural paradigm broke away from the Ottoman Balkan world: “Cultural identity emerged as a public issue in the country only in the wake of the 1848 bourgeois and nationalist revolutions. The so called *révolutions à la française* kick-started the split between Romania and the Balkan world.”<sup>21</sup> All the leaders of the failed 1848 Romanian revolution who were later to undertake the building of modern Romania – politicians, poets and historians – were formed in Paris. Among the most notable were Ion Ghica, the Brătianu brothers (Ion C. and Dumitru), Constantin Rosetti, the Golescu brothers (Nicolae, Stefan and Alexandru G.) all of whom occupied important ministerial positions between 1866 and 1880; less radical and politically committed – the writers Ion Heliade Rădulescu, Vasile

---

<sup>21</sup> Spiridon, p. 149.

Alecsandri, Alexandru (Alec) Russo and Cezar Boliac; the historians Mihail Kogălniceanu (also educated in Berlin) and Nicolae Bălcescu.<sup>22</sup>

These young leaders brought home the utopian vision of “la France éternelle” and patterned the institutions of the new state on French models. In many ways, in fact, Romania started off as a cultural colony of France.<sup>23</sup> In 1853, Ion C. Brătianu, leader of the Liberal Party and prime minister between 1876 and 1888, wrote a letter to Napoleon III asking for support for the union of the Principalities. The letter outlines the mutual benefits of a colonial rapport between France and Romania:

The constitution of this Romanian state would be the most beautiful [French] conquest outside its territory. Romania’s army would be the French army in the Orient, its ports at the Black Sea and on the Danube would be the bases/ warehouses of French commerce, and because of the abundance of building timber, these ports could be at the same time construction sites for the French navy; the raw materials of this country would advantageously supply France’s factories, which in turn would find a big market in the same countries. Finally, France would have all the colonial advantages without the corresponding costs. The comparison is not exaggerated; lacking a metropolis we adopted France for a long time now as our second country; she became the vivid origin, which inspires our moral and intellectual life. Since the great revolution, whose principles suited our instincts and traditions, France became our ideal and we wholeheartedly entrusted ourselves to her.<sup>24</sup>

Admittedly, Brătianu’s diplomatic rhetoric is slightly overstated by virtue of his political mission and a personal attachment to France; nevertheless, the memorandum is a perfect illustration and explanation of the strong connection between the two countries. That the Romanian politician offered colonial dues and cultural allegiance to France without the

---

<sup>22</sup> Jianu, pp. 7-13.

<sup>23</sup> See Jianu, pp. 7-13; and Campbell, pp. 101-55.

<sup>24</sup> Brătianu, “Memoriu”, pp.157-58.

Constituirea acestui Stat roman ar fi cea mai frumoasa cucerire ce a facut vreodata afara din teritoriul sau. Armata Statului roman ar fi armata Frantei in Orient, porturile sale de la Marea Neagra si de pe Dunare ar fi intrepozitele comertului francez, si din cauza abundentii lemnurilor noastre de constructive, aceste porturi ar fi totdeodata magazinele de constructie (chantiers) ale marinei franceze; produsele brute ale acestor avute tari ar alimenta cu avantaj fabricile Frantei, care ar gasi in schimb un mare debit in aceleasi tari. In fine, Franta ar avea toate avantajele unei colonii, fara a avea cheltuielile ce aceasta ocazioneaza. Compararea nu este exagerata; in lipsa de o metropola, am adoptat de mult timp pe Franta, de a doua noastra patrie; ea a devenit sorgintea vie din care tragem viata noastra morala si intelectuala. De la revolutia cea mare, ale carei principii vorbeau instinctelor si traditiunilor natiunii noastre, Franta a devenit idealul nostru si ne-am dat cu totul ei.

colonial costs, is an indication of the political vulnerability of the Principalities. In view of the competing and clashing claims of the Great Powers in the area, national emancipation could only be achieved at a cost. Becoming a French colony did not seem too high a price. In fact, the Danubian Principalities would have never been able to achieve union and independence without French support. The 1848 uprising had been brutally suppressed by coordinated Russian and Turkish troops. And it was only after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War that France started to encourage the union as a buffer against Russia. Even so, the local elites had to outmanoeuvre the opposition of Great Britain, Austria, Russia and the Ottoman Empire – by electing the same ruler in both Wallachia and Moldavia in 1859, in order to eventually complete the administrative and legislative union in 1861. Once this was achieved, France continued to provide political backing until Romania's formal international recognition in 1878.<sup>25</sup> It also offered a normative model to the still amorphous local culture. Self-colonization and assimilation into the French culture were, therefore, part and parcel of Romania's modernity project.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, as Ionesco noted, the transition from the “Middle Ages of the Balkans” to “liberal Europe,” Romania's transmogrification into a dapper French cultural satellite, was fraught with many hurdles and drawbacks. Reality in the provinces was not remotely similar to that in Western Europe, especially insofar as the large rural population was still anchored in a traditional “oriental” outlook and highly resistant to modernization. The elites' dream of a modern nation modelled after France clashed with the local culture steeped in the world-view of its Ottoman past. Modernizing features were super-imposed on archaic landscapes and mindsets.

Vasile Alecsandri, a Romanian poet of the 1848 generation, described Iași, the capital of Moldavia, as a schizoid formation, a “town with two faces, one Oriental and one European”:

The juxtaposition of these two different characters, which thoroughly proves Europe's influence over a part of the Romanians, the rich and privileged part, and

---

<sup>25</sup> See Mark Mazower, *The Balkans* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), pp. 86-7; Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> See Balazs Trencsenyi, “History and Character: Visions of National Peculiarity in the Romanian Political Discourse of the 19th century”, in *We the People: Politics of National Peculiarity in Southeastern Europe*, ed. Diana Mishkova (Budapest: Central European UP, 2009), pp. 139-78 (p. 143); and Monica Spiridon. Both scholars write of a “self-colonizing” drive, playing down perhaps France's interests and contribution to this state of affairs.

the incessant fight between old and new ideas, were not engraved on the face of our capital a few years ago. Then she possessed more of an oriental physiognomy. But ever since the spirits started to open to the rays of civilization, a big transformation arrived in all matters, a rapid change occurred both in the tastes and the habits of this small part of the Romanian society I have already mentioned. Long and large clothes gave way to fitted European clothes, the Turkish style hat bowed to the European hat; red and yellow boots were replaced by black leather shoes. . . . The houses had necessarily to acquire a foreign shape to suit the nature of the new ideas.<sup>27</sup>

Echoing the idea of a rapid change explored by Ionesco and Boia as a defining event of modernity, Alecsandri exposes the contradictions inflicted by modernization on the urban landscape. A disorienting jumble of contradictory elements assaults the sensibility of the author, who longs for the soothing harmony of past times. “Now mingle all of this in your imagination,” he continues:

Throw them before your eyes as if they were some toys, and if it causes something irregular and unusual, then you will have a true picture of our capital and you will convince yourself that there is no town in the world made up of more contrasts. Iașii [sic] is a curious theatre, decorated with palaces and shacks side to side; its actors are luxury and poverty, and comedy is being played all day long on its stage under different titles.<sup>28</sup>

The surreal note of the depiction and its use of the theatrical simile points to the difficulty of imaginatively accommodating an improvised urban landscape: Iasi is the product of an artificial mismatch. Alecsandri imagines the temporal and cultural fractures of the jumbled town as a burlesque performance of modernity. He indicts the deceit and hypocrisy of hasty modernization impudently brandished by the kitsch city in an amalgam of toy- and prop-like structures. The architectural incongruity reflects a sad social reality whereby Western modernity —“the rays of civilization”—is the privilege of the rich. Its makeshift nature

---

<sup>27</sup> Vasile Alecsandri, “Iașii in 1844” in *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], 3 vols, (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socecu, 1876), III, pp. 98-117 (p. 103).

Farmecul unei politii ce are doua fete, una orientala si una evropienesca. Alaturarea acestor doua caractere deosebite, care dovedesce atat de mult inaurirea Evropei asupra unei parti dintre Romani, partea bogata si privilegiata, si lupta necontenita intre ideile vechi si noue, nu era nici de cum tiparita pe fata capitalei noastre cu vr’o cativa ani mai in urma. Atunci ea purta o fisionomie mai mult orientala; insa de cand spiritele au inceput a se desveli la radele civilizatiei, o mare prefacere s-au ivit in toate, o schimbare rapide s-au savarsit atat in gusturile cat si in obiceiurile acelei mici parti a societarii romanesci de care am pomenit. Hainele lungi si largi au dat rand straelor mai stramte ale Evropei; slicul s-au inchinat dinaintea palariei; ciubotele rosii si galbene pau dat pasul incaltamintelor de vacs; divanurile late s’au cioplit in forme de canapele elegante, si in urmarea tuturor acestor noutati si a mai multor alte ce s-au introdus cu moda, casele au trebuit negresit sa primeasca o forma straine si potrivita cu natura ideilor de astadi.

<sup>28</sup> Alecsandri, “Iașii”, p. 104.



suggests that transformations are only superficial and old habits persist beneath modern appearance.

## 2. The Ironies of Writing the Nation

As Alecsandri shows, Romania's ragged modernity generated anxieties about the vulnerability, precariousness, and incongruity of the new state. Creating a European nation out of a peasant community still strongly attached to its Ottoman past was not an easy task. Aesthetic and political principles demanded that the nation should be homogeneously synchronized with Western modernity. Bratianu, for example, advocated the creation of a homogenous and autonomous state on European lines through progress (modernization) and rationalism (social engineering). He blamed imperialism for the monstrous scars in the national physiognomy: "Blessed is the nation which will be able not to find the poison of the foreign (rule) a long time afterwards!"<sup>29</sup> Because imperialism created "unproductive and bastard cultures", the trauma, he argued, remained indelibly indented in the ethnic fabric of the nation. The interminglings were so numerous and varied that disentangling and separating the nationalities of Europe was an impossible task. Brătianu's solution was, following again the example of France where the Gallic-Roman element predominated, to streamline the nation in a coherent ethnic and cultural entity.<sup>30</sup>

Inventing the nation, then, entailed rapid modernization and ardent cultural engineering. The radical reshaping of the culture according to the principles of nationalist ideology, the suppression of old Ottoman habits and influences and the adoption of Western institutions and ideas, were the main tenets of the nation-building process.<sup>31</sup> But the erratic contradictions, the chasm between Romania's Balkan rural past and a Western urban future, made the invention of the nation a difficult task. The national project was bogged down in an intractable list of existential and ideological dichotomies: East versus West, tradition versus modernity, authenticity versus emulation, national versus cosmopolitan. There were, on the one hand, those like Bratianu who were determined to capitalize on affinities with a

---

<sup>29</sup> Ion C. Bratianu, "Nationalitatea" [Nationality] in *Din Scrierile si Cuvantarile lui Ion C. Bratianu: Lupta pentru Redesteparea nationala* [Selected Writings and Speeches: The Fight for National Emancipation] (Iasi: Moldova, 2002), pp. 158-89 (p. 183).

<sup>30</sup> Bratianu, "Nationalitatea", p. 178.

<sup>31</sup> Spiridon, p. 149.

reputable culture and powerful political entity in order to safeguard the integrity of a fragile and shabby state. But there were, on the other hand, intellectuals like the young editors of *Dacia Literară* [Literary Dacia] —Alecsandri among them—who upon their return from prestigious European universities felt that local culture was threatened by the strong French influence and opposed excessive imitation. Herder’s nationalist ideas, very popular in France at the time, paradoxically stimulated their interest in the vernacular oral culture, national history, rural traditions and local sentiment rather than in metropolitan modernity. And because literature played an important role in the construction of the nation, they felt the Romanian identity had to be written along these lines. On Anderson’s model of nation formation, Romania was as much a cultural and literary idea as a political project. As the political vision of a modern state clashed with an anachronistic cultural model, unsettling contradictions ensued in the way the nation defined itself. Definition meant creating, enacting guiding beliefs, turning a resistant reality into wishful projections. Hence *Dacia Literară*’s reaction to the emulation of French modernity.

Sorin Alexandrescu describes this conflict between state and culture as one of the many rifts and paradoxes characteristic of Romanian identity. But neither is this state-culture dichotomy ideologically consistent. Although *Dacia Literară*’s reactions seem to be based on a pragmatic local world-view, its anachronistic cultural model attached to the cult of past, rootedness in the native soil and the implicit resistance to foreign influences or modernization, was itself a mimetic response to French Romanticism. Ionesco perceptively notes this contradiction:

It is interesting to note, however, that the criticism directed at the anti-nationalists is done with weapons and literary devices taken precisely from the great masters of French literature and that it remains heavily influenced by Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Casimir Delavigne, the nationality principle and the entire French romantic school: its love for nature, its taste for the country’s history its Romanian legends and even its passion for folklore perfectly follow in the suit of *Odes and Ballads*, *Meditations* and later *The Legend of the Centuries*, etc.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Ionesco, *Littérature Roumaine suivi de Grosse Chaleur* (Cognac: Fata Morgana, 1998), pp. 31-2.

Il est curieux de noter, cependant, que les critiques adressée aux anti-nationaux se font avec des armes et des procédés littéraires pris justement chez les grands maîtres de la littérature française et qu’il est restée fortement influencés par Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Casimir Delavigne, le principe français des nationalités et toute l’école romantique française: son <<amour>> de la nature, son goût pour l’histoire du pays, ses légendes roumaines et même sa passion pour la littérature folklorique, s’inscrivent parfaitement a la suite des *Odes et Ballades*, des *Méditations*, plus tard de la *Légende des Siècles*, etc.

The desire to find an authentic identity, either European and modern, or local and traditional, was couched in borrowed terms and ideologies, making the task ever more elusive. An authentic Romania did not seem to exist beyond the dichotomies of an “over-determined imaginary construct”, to use Spiridon’s term, and the political strategies of a fragile constituency.<sup>33</sup>

The mimetic drive was, therefore, not entirely unproblematic even for those who were in the vanguard. The young intellectuals vaunting French education felt upon their return that the local culture was threatened by this strong influence, which had to be kept in check or else the result would be a bastardized, inauthentic culture. This was the common aporia of nationalism that came to mark cultural debates all through to the twentieth century. Should Romania be a truly cosmopolitan European culture or should it preserve its traditional rural ethos? The first reactions came from the editors of the short-lived *Dacia Literară* (January-June 1840). Mihail Kogalniceanu, Alexandru Russo and Vasile Alecsandri, all schooled in the West, were antagonized by the excessive imitation and by the effects on Romanian identity of a shallow and skewed assimilation of European culture. In Campbell’s view:

It seemed to Kogalniceanu and his friends that a whole generation of *déracinés* was coming into being, losing all ties with its native soil in a vain attempt to become part of another world to which it could never belong.<sup>34</sup>

They had an elitist contempt for the “*déraciné*” or “the *bonjouriste*”, a derogatory term for the pseudointellectual who garnished his speech with the few French words he possessed.<sup>35</sup> Elitism and nationalism combined in the denunciation of the ignorant infidel. The snobbish pseudointellectual became a favourite satire and comedy target in the nationalist literature promoted by *Dacia Literară*. The review was also averse to translations of popular French novels, advocating instead the production and consumption of local texts. Since they were themselves indebted to French thought and literature, what troubled them appears to have been the dilution of French culture rather than the influence itself. They hoped that a minimal adaptation of French forms to what was considered a local content would encourage

---

<sup>33</sup> Spiridon, p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> Campbell, pp. 80-81.

<sup>35</sup> The 1848 revolutionaries were nicknamed *bonjouristes* on account of their penchant for French culture. The term became popular after *Junimea* and Caragiale used it to castigate the liberals for the futility of their project..

the development of national sentiment. Alecsandri, for example, skilfully emulated Lamartine's *Meditations* and adapted them for patriotic purposes. Despite being modelled on a borrowed form, these poems evoked local landscapes and histories and contributed, it was thought, to the shaping of a Romanian sensibility.<sup>36</sup>

*Dacia Literară*'s input was particularly valuable on the language question. The Romanian language transitioned fast from an almost extinct vernacular thanks to an ardent revival campaign which sought to purge it of the linguistic traces left by political domination. In a short piece entitled "How I Learned Romanian", nationalist writer Constantin Negruzzi describes the childhood experience of re-learning his native language, which was not taught in schools at the time and was, therefore, almost exclusively oral. Romanian needed to be saved from the encroachment of Greek, which was the learned idiom. The scarcity of Romanian literature is related with self-ironic zest:

At a time when we had forgotten that we were Romanians and that we had a language of our own, at a time when we lacked both books and printing presses; at a time when everybody jumped on *dasi* [sic, no dictionary entry for the word, most probably taken over from Greek in an unstandardized form and referring to Greek grammatical inflections] and *perispomena/perispomes* like old women on dogs and tom-cats, because only Greek was taught in the public school; when finally, Romanian literature was at the soul's mercy, a few old-fashioned boyars fond of Romanianness as they could not accustom themselves to the beautiful [Greek] words [...] were dismal and mournful of their loss of language gazed yearningly towards Budapest or Brasov wherefrom they received every year calendars with stories at the end, and every so often a pamphlet teaching them how to make sugar out of corn kernels or bread and starch from potatoes.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Ionesco is particularly virulent about Alecsandri's lack of originality in "Itinerar Critic: Originalitate si Pasoptism" in *Razboi cu Toata Lumea*, I, pp. 49-52. More balanced readings can be found in Ionesco *Littérature Roumaine*, pp. 31-2 and George Calinescu, *Istoria Literaturii Romane* [The History of Romanian Literature], pp. 124-25. The most exhaustive study on the French literary sources of Alecsandri's work is Charles Drouhet, *Vasile Alecsandri si Scriitorii Francezi* (Bucharest: Cultura Nationala, 1924).

<sup>37</sup> Constantin Negruzzi, "Cum Am Invatat Romanesce" [How I Learned Romanian] in *Scrierile lui Constantin Negruzzi* [The Writings of Constantin Negruzzi] (Bucuresti: Libraria Socecu, 1872), I, pp. 3-13 (p. 3).

Pe cand uitasemu ca suntemu Romani si ca avem si noi o limba, pe cand ne lipseau si carti si tipografie; pe cand toata lumea se aruncase in *dasi* si *perispomeni* ca babele in catei si motani, caci la scoala publica se invata numai grecesce; cand in sfarsit, literatura Romana era la darea sufletului, cativa boieri, ruginiti in romanism, neputandu-se deprinde cu frumoasele *diceri* [...] sedeau tristi, si jaleau perderea limbii uitandu-se cu dor spre Buda sau Brasov, de unde le veneau pe tot anul calendare cu povesti la sfarsit, si din cand in cand cate o brosură invetetoare a mestesugului de a face zahar din ciocalai de cucuruz, sau pane si *crohmale* de cartofe.

Irony mediates the anomaly of the situation – the pathetic condition to which the Romanian language was reduced – and the text’s emotional content. The mock-patriotic tone disguises true sympathies but also an early awareness of the fallacies and excesses of nationalism. Essentially, though, humour and irony are the only registers which can frame the strangeness of the experience.

While *Dacia Literară*’s contributors were dedicated to the revival of the language, they also countered the excesses of Ion Heliade Rădulescu’s Latinist school, which advocated a reformation of the Romanian language so that it closely followed Latin to the detriment of natural evolution and shared historical and social uses. Predictably, the attempts to modernize the language programmatically were often unsuccessful, and when they were successful, they were often unwittingly ridiculous. Negruzzi ironically describes the ridiculous effects of the institutionalization of the modern Romanian language now assaulted by the Latin fad and Western European neologisms. The story goes that a family was planning to send one of their sons to the town school to be taught German, French and Latin. When Negruzzi asked why the Romanian language was not envisaged in their plans, the peasants answered with dissimulated naivety that if he did not learn those languages he could not understand contemporary Romanian.<sup>38</sup> It seems like Negruzzi found a more authentically Romanian voice in the ironic twist of the anecdote. This type of wit, specific for popular aphorisms and writings inspired by the rural ethos, was embedded in the structures of the vernacular language the author sought to preserve. At the same time as he criticizes the forgery of the language, the text promotes the adoption of the vernacular idiom and the witticism of the oral style.

Alecsandri makes a similar point in “The Grotesque Dictionary” he assembled in the pages of *Convorbiri Literare* [Literary Conversations]. Commenting on the aberrant consequences of partisan linguistic interventions, especially with respect to the Latinist trend, Alecsandri writes: “Nothing more regrettable than to see a nation, awakening from the darkness of barbarism, fall prey to the claws of pedantry. She is exposed to the most terrible

---

<sup>38</sup> Negruzzi, “Scrisoare XXV. Omul de Teara” [Letter XXV. The Peasant] in *Scrierile*, pp. 296-301.

calamity, to the calamity of becoming grotesque!”<sup>39</sup> The sting of the critique falls again on forced modernization and emulation of the West. The programmatic adoption of a Westernized written culture yielded grotesque, monstrous formations, Alecsandri contended:

The Romanian pedants, infernal witches assisting to the birth of Romania, have put a bad spell on her with their evil owl eyes. Lacking any aesthetic sense, they took charge of the education of the Emperor Traian’s poor daughter and taught her some revoltingly trivial words of their own creation. The unfortunate girl acquired the habit of committing linguistic monstrosities that offend common sense, aesthetics, and the poetic harmony of the Romanian idiom.<sup>40</sup>

The extract plays the pedantry and sparseness of Latin against the disinhibited expressivity of a vernacular whose favourite forms were fairy tales, creating an ironic contrast in order to more effectively deliver its message. That Alecsandri portrays the pedantic scholars of the Latinist school as fantastical creatures of folklore is a witty reversal of roles. It is as if the vernacular legacy the Latinists were trying to suppress is making a revengeful comeback in Alecsandri’s parable. The author emphasizes the social and cultural content of language which artificial linguistic interventions dislocate. An entire semantic and intertextual history is sedimented in that long-standing relation between sound and meaning. The monstrous neologisms, Alecsandri avers, brutally interrupt the poetic community of old linguistic forms. The violence and abuse associated with this absurdity is echoed in his choice of an overly negative register—“infernal,” “bad,” “evil,” “revoltingly trivial,” “monstrosities”—thus restoring the form-content harmony disrupted by neologisms. This commentary chimes with the larger problem Ionesco signalled in his overview of Caragiale’s plays, the problem of how language mirrors society and its various transformations and modulations. In Alecsandri’s “Grotesque Dictionary,” this happens literally because language itself is the target of reform and modernization. When severed from its historical and social context, the result is absurd.

Earnestly committed to shaping and guiding the nation, literature and cultural commentary often resorted to irony when confronted with the grotesque tension between a variegated and complex reality and the homogenizing ambitions of the state and the aesthetic visions of the written culture. Because these modern disjunctions and contradictions resisted

---

<sup>39</sup> Vasile Alecsandri, “Dictionaru Grotescu,” in *Convorbiri Literare* 3, no. 11 (1 August 1869), p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Alecsandri, “Dictionaru”, p. 173.

logical articulation or mitigation, sarcasm was the only tool available to the perplexed commentator. Like Alecsandri, many authors had recourse to spicy banter in both creative and critical literature, so much so that sociologist Constantin Rădulescu-Motru singled out such banter as specific to Romanian culture, coining the term *zeflemea*—a rather sardonic irony. *Zeflemea* capitalized on the contrasts of the Romanian culture, exaggerating their effects by way of a creative use of the vernacular. In view of the oral character of the Romanian society at the time, the vernacular was expressive of a pragmatic and emotional rural sensibility and relied heavily on proverbs and idiomatic expressions. Its humorous and often vulgar effects could be used for polemical purposes against the pretentiousness of learned culture, which emulated Western forms.

While perfectly opportune as an artistic device in literary works, Rădulescu-Motru argues, irony was not suitable for other forms of social and cultural commentary. Rather than positing constructive solutions to the problems specific for a society in the making, it was expressive of an elitist disdain. Although Rădulescu-Motru downplays the corrosive potential of *zeflemea*, his analysis of irony is spot-on. He believed this mode to have been initiated by the mobile Romanian elite, whom he saw as bringing home Western education and values and using them to belittle their local culture:

Assured of the superiority of the culture they were bringing over; eager for success, but without luck: these discontented people were the first critics of Romanian culture. Their criticism, sometimes justified but always harsh, was practiced in saloons in daily conversations in the form of “zeflemele,” a type of light irony suitable to the character of our language.<sup>41</sup>

The distance imposed by Western education between these young intellectuals and their home country, which they perceived as one between civilization and barbarism, was mediated through irony.

Irony was also an aesthetic means of resisting imitation, mass culture, and modernity—it was a manifestation of what Garabet Ibrăileanu described as Romania’s critical spirit.<sup>42</sup> In Ibrăileanu’s view, two oppositional tendencies shaped modern Romanian culture: on the one hand, the mimetic drive which inspired the creation of the modern state and a sceptical resistance and attachment to the past, on the other. “A critical spirit was

---

<sup>41</sup> Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, *Cultura Româna*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul Critic în Cultura Românească* [The Critical Spirit in Romanian Culture] (Chisinau: Editura Litera, 1996), p. 28.

needed to check the elements of Western culture and to validate only those [...] which were suitable to valorise the Romanian energy and capacities”, Ibrăileanu writes.<sup>43</sup> He believed this oppositional dynamic ensured a healthy progress. Alecu Russo had likewise signalled the necessity of a critical stance to counter the anomalous effects of modernization. Russo was particularly concerned with the effects of language programming and the divorce between popular and literary culture, reiterating Alecsandri’s and Negruzzi’s concern about the absurdity of linguistic reinvention: “Criticism has become mandatory lately when the Romanian language is crucified on all sorts of crosses, deformed by all kinds of systems, obscured by various orthographies one more absurd than the others.”<sup>44</sup>

More often than not, as Alecsandri’s and Negruzzi’s texts attest, the critical stance was expressed ironically. If not very useful on social terms, the mechanisms of irony were, however, very productive aesthetically.

Besides advocating the need for criticism, Alecu Russo employed *zeflemea* to denounce the falsification of Romanian culture. He wondered in 1847 whether Romania was a nation or “a cosmopolitan colony, a sort of Franco-Italian-Greek Algiers”, reflecting with sadness on the disparities between the fantasies of official culture and the realities of oral tradition:

The grammars seem to me empty dissertations of Latin, French, Italian linguistics...but not proper Romanian grammars. I research the literature and come across an unpalatable mixture of neo-Latin languages, a bunch of ideas taken over without any method (system) from foreigners, and by consequence I don’t find any original character to it.

Where is the Romanian character though? Where to look for it in order to get a better idea of the Romanian genius? One day I walk by chance into a market fair and all of a sudden I think I am in a different world. I see people and clothes I haven’t seen in towns; I hear a harmonious picturesque language that’s altogether different from the jargon of the books. While I was wondering whether the Romanians are a

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibrăileanu, p. 28.

Era deci, inca o data, nevoie de un spirit critic, care sa cerceteze elementele culturii apusene si sa valideze numai pe acele care, ca sa pastram comparatia de mai sus, erau proprii pentru a pune in valoare energia si capacitatile romanesti.

<sup>44</sup>Russo, the manifesto article of the first number of *Steaua Dunarii* (1855), quoted in Ibrăileanu, p. 31. [Critica s-a facut neaparata mai ales in timpul de fata, cand limba romaneasca este rastignita pe fel de fel de cruci, stropsita prin fel de fel de sisteme, intunecata prin fel de fel de ortografii, unele mai absurde decat altele.]



nation or a cosmopolitan modern colony, a Franco-Italo-Greek Algiers, I am starting to perceive the truth.<sup>45</sup>

Romania's description as a colonial medley is bitterly ironic in view of the fact that homogeneity was a basic tenet of nationalism. Russo condemns the fact that Romanians were willingly prostrating themselves to foreign influences, thus contradicting their nationalist aspirations. The Eurocentric scorn for the weakness and inferiority of the colonial subject applies, by logic of the simile, to Romania's hybridity. Against the colonial, hybrid character of the learned culture, Russo counterposes the traditional folk culture, where he locates the authentic character of the nation. This disparity between written culture and folklore divided the modern literary landscape and informed many of its responses.<sup>46</sup>

Cezar Boliac, Alecsandri's colleague at *Dacia Literară*, takes an altogether more imaginative and light-hearted approach to Romanian hybridity. Although good-humoured, the irony is still caustic:

The expression of these varied lands and its capricious weather is precisely the national character of Romanians, which is unlike any other nation. The Romanians sing when they lament; switch from one passion to another, from one wish to another, from one affection to another, from love to hate and from hate to love without even noticing. [...] Her [Romania's] destiny, as far back as history can remember, was to be wedged between barbarism and civilization. More civilized than the Occident and more barbaric than the Orient in remote antiquity; more barbaric than the Occident and more civilized than the Orient today.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Alecu Russo, "Poezia populară" [The Popular Poetry],

<[http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Poezia\\_poporală](http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Poezia_poporală)> [accessed 13 October 2012], section V.

Gramaticile imi par niste seci disertatiuni de limbistica latina, franceza, italiana...insa nu adevarate gramatici romanesti. Cercetez literatura si dau de o amestecatura indigesta de limbile neolatine, de o suma de idei luate fara nici un sistem de la straini, si prin urmare nu-i gasesc nici un caracter original. Unde este romanismul? Unde sa-l caut, pentru ca sa-mi fac o idee exacta de geniul roman? Din intamplare ma primblu intr-o zi intr-un iarmaroc si deocamdata ma cred in alta lume. Vad oameni si haine ce nu vazusem in orase; aud o limba armonioasa, pitoreasca si cu totul straina de jargonul cartilor. De unde eram la indoiala daca romanii sunt o natie sau o colonie cosmopolita moderna, un soi de Algerie franco-italiano-grecesca, incep a intrevedea adevarul.

<sup>46</sup> Sorin Alexandrescu notes that the oral folk culture represented the eternal authentic dimension of the nation which compensated for the fickleness and inconsistencies of the official culture, exposed as it was to external influences. The village was so indelibly written in the national consciousness that even avant-garde writers like Tzara, Fondane, Voronca and Vinea explored the pastoral themes of rural poetics. See pp. 4-5.

<sup>47</sup> Cezar Boliac, "Mozaicul Social" in *Gandirea Romaneasca in Epoca Pasoptista (1830-1860)*[Romanian Thinking During the 1848 Era], ed. by Paul Cornea and Mihai Zamfir (Bucuresti: Editura Pentru Literatura, 1969), pp. 449-61 (p. 451).

If somewhat condescending, Boliac rejoices in the capricious character of the Romanians as inhabitants of a space where the two cultural paradigms, the Orient and the Occident meet in a dramatic clash. The analysis is again framed by the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. However, there is a sense in this description of a rich creative potential fed by Romania's stark contrasts and excesses, an exotic authenticity that can somehow redeem modernity. Boliac's tone is typical. The fact that Romania's cultural hybridity, exacerbated by modernization, resisted logical articulation, complicated identity discourses. The epistemological confusion triggered by hybridity and the paradigm shift was often conveyed by way of irony.

An apposite illustration of *zeflemea* is offered by Boliac's 1858 description of Bucharest:

Paris is famous for the diversity of languages spoken there. I bet only in Cișmigiu (fashionable park in central Bucharest) they are speaking more languages than in the whole of Paris.

There's no other city to have the appearance of such a relatively great activity; it will be a great deal, though, if two per cent of these individuals swarming on the Mogoșoaia bridge, in carriages, on horse or walking, are about any business. Nowhere in the world can leisure pass as serious business and serious business as leisure. When some sleep, others eat, others go for walks in order to stimulate their appetite or to help digestion or after sleep; when one office works, another hasn't opened yet, another has already closed. If the head of a department studied in France, he eats at six o'clock, comes to the office at two o'clock and all employees, all who have business in that department have to adjust their time according to the schedule of the minister; if after a few months a minister who studied in Germany takes over the same department, he eats at two o'clock, comes to the ministry at eleven and all employees, and all those who have business in the department have to adjust their schedule according to the one of the minister; if the minister did not study anywhere, he eats when he feels hungry, comes to the department when he gets bored at home, and all employees, all with business in the department will spy on the minister's moves at his residence and take advantage of the favourable moments.<sup>48</sup>

The reference to Paris, warranted by its role in the national emancipation struggle and irresistible modernist appeal, has rhetorical motives. Romania's aspiration to turn its capital into *Little Paris*, evident both in its French architecture and social life, are shown to be not only disproportionate but also ridiculous. Bucharest's provincial shabbiness and oriental hybridity belie its metropolitan ambitions. According to Boliac, the outcome is a caricature rather than a replica of Western forms. The chaotic rhythm and piecemeal social landscape

---

<sup>48</sup> Boliac, "Mozaicul", pp. 458-59.

of Bucharest conveyed by the puns and syntactic twists of the text converge into a burlesque metropolitan vignette. As opposed to life in Germany and France, where customs and etiquette impose strict rules of conduct, life in Romania was driven by the ineffable logic of personal whims and allegiances, which combined to produce an absurd spectacle.

### 3. *Junimea*, Absurdism, Avant-Garde

This critical trend and Rădulescu-Motru's sociology of irony found its best expression in the activity of *Junimea* (the Youth) and in Titu Maiorescu's polemical articles. The lectures, articles, and literature of the young members of *Junimea* formulated the most lucid and coherent criticism of modern Romanian society. The iconoclastic and bitterly ironic mode of their critique is particularly relevant for my line of argument.<sup>49</sup> George Călinescu points out that literary critic Titu Maiorescu used "the malicious association of technical neologisms and local jargon" as a stylistic polemical strategy to humiliate his opponents. This style, which in my reading is cognate with *zeflemea*, conveyed the spiritual inadequacy of its target and sharpened his arguments.<sup>50</sup>

Established in 1863 by Maiorescu, *Junimea* set to counter the mimetic drive and recover traditional values.<sup>51</sup> During their meetings and in the review *Convorbiri Literare* [Literary Conversations] they kept their audience abreast of the latest developments in Western thought. *Junimea*'s authority and reputation rested on the outstanding quality of its critical and literary output. It featured young writers who would become the masters of Romanian literature and creators of its modern literary language, such as Mihai Eminescu, Ion Creangă, I.L. Caragiale and Ioan Slavici. The group's legacy is, in fact, most often evoked for its support and promotion of these writers.

Maiorescu's criticism of "empty forms" or "forms without substance" targeted the indiscriminate adoption of Western traditions by a Romania that was neither compatible with

---

<sup>49</sup> Hitchins, p. 60. Hitchins suggests that the *Junimea* exerted a lasting influence on the way Romanians perceived and defined themselves.

<sup>50</sup> George Călinescu, *Istoria Literaturii Române. Compendiu* [The History of Romanian Literature. Compendium] (Bucharest: Litera International, 2001), p. 150.

<sup>51</sup> Spiridon attributes *Junimea*'s strong critical stance regarding Romania's cultural dependency on France to their pro-German sympathies (p. 155). Yet, as I have shown, a critical propensity was already manifest in the French-educated patrons of *Dacia Literară* some of which, like Alecsandri, later joined *Junimea*.

nor prepared for such transformations. Maiorescu believed that modernization and the adoption of foreign models in the principalities ignored and contradicted local realities and traditions. The French forms adopted by the elites, he argued, isolated and disregarded Romania's large rural population which bore the brunt of the former's privileges.<sup>52</sup> Inspired by German Romantic historicist theories and the evolutionist ideas of Herbert Spencer and Henry Thomas Buckle, *Junimea* advocated organic cultural development and was opposed to hasty modernization.<sup>53</sup> As part of their cultural criticism, *Junimea* also contested the liberal revolutionary ideology. The distaste for French forms was, therefore, at least partly motivated by their political convictions and German education, as Spiridon claims. This was a conservative position later formalized by the society's support of the Conservative party; it also reflected a typically modernist reaction to modernity and its corresponding quest for value in community and tradition.

Maiorescu formulated *Junimea*'s cultural critique in "Against the Contemporary Direction in Romanian Culture," published in *Convorbiri Literare* in 1868. The text prefigures and might have actually inspired Ionesco's analysis. It is a perceptive dissection of Romanian institutions and culture:

Sunk until the beginning of the nineteenth century in oriental barbarity, Romanian society started waking up from its lethargy around 1820, shaken maybe belatedly by the contagious stirrings that carried the ideas of the French revolution to the geographical extremities of Europe. Drawn towards light, our youth effected that extraordinary migration towards the French and German fountains of science, a migration that gained momentum and gave free Romania that lustre of foreign [Western] societies. Unfortunately, only the outside lustre! As our youth was and still is unprepared and astonished by the great phenomena of modern culture, they assimilated only the effects, but did not envisage the causes; they saw only the forms exterior to civilization but did not fathom the deeper historical foundations that necessarily produced those forms and without whose pre-existence they could not have existed. And thus limited in a fatal shallowness, with their minds and hearts lit by too precarious a fire, the young Romanians were and are coming back to their country set on emulating and reproducing the appearances of Western culture, trusting that they will immediately achieve the literature, science, fine arts, and especially the freedom of a modern state. And these juvenile illusions have been so recurrent that they literally created an intellectual fashion in Romanian society, a

---

<sup>52</sup> See Andrei Pippidi, "Les 'Formes Vides', Hier et Aujourd'hui", *Revue des études sud-est européennes*, XXX (1992), 209-16 (p. 214). Pippidi suggests Maiorescu was worried the economic inequalities would cause social unrest.

<sup>53</sup> Hitchins, pp. 60-61.

strong direction that equally attracts the young and the old, those who leave in order to learn and those who come back in order to apply their learning.<sup>54</sup>

The article is a foundational text, part of the compulsory curriculum for many generations of Romanian students and an essential critical tool of Romanian cultural studies. To put it simply, Romanians understand themselves in terms of this fundamental incongruence, the split between form and content. The opposition between East and West is described as one between barbarism and civilization, darkness and light, lethargy and revolution. The dichotomy, organized around the Eurocentric monopoly of civilizational values, seems to entail a distance which cannot be mediated. Western forms could only be adopted in a skewed manner, mistranslated and deformed. Wedged between the intractable opposition of Balkan barbarity versus Western civilization, young Romanian culture seemed to be doomed. Dazzled by the trappings of Western modernity but unable to capitalize on the “German and French fountains of science”, its predicament was to hold the spurious status of kitsch.

In line with Rădulescu-Motru’s analysis, Maiorescu and the other members of *Junimea* issued their judgements after having experienced first-hand the Western civilizational standards and values during many years of education in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. Predictably, Romania’s attempts to replicate Western modernity failed lamentably. Yet Maiorescu’s critique, like the aspirations of the “young Romanians” he criticized, was rooted in his experience of the power centres of Western Europe, which afforded him critical distance. It is from this viewpoint that he delineates the history of modern Romania as the incongruent story of a marginal culture. Maiorescu’s aesthetic solution envisaged a return to ideal local values, to the Romanian sensibility of Eminescu’s poetry and Creangă’s prose, a space that, in his view, transcended Eurocentric dichotomies. Ideologically, however, his stance was a conservative elitist reaction to modernization and democracy. The cultural pessimism Maiorescu espoused also entailed the preservation of the privileges of the landed gentry. The aesthetic and cultural debate concealed the more thorny confrontation between liberal bourgeoisie and conservatives, as attested by Maiorescu’s political affiliation.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Titu Maiorescu, “In Contra Directiei de Astazi in Cultura Romana (1868)” [Against the Contemporary Direction in Romanian Culture], in *Critice* [Critiques], 2 vols (Bucharest: Minerva, 2008), I, pp. 135-47.

<sup>55</sup> In 1871 *Junimea* started supporting the Romanian Conservative Party. Titu Maiorescu was elected deputy and consequently had a long-term and successful political career which culminated with the leadership of the Conservative Party for a short period, between 1913

The dilution and improvisation of culture, the threatening encroachment of low culture and the proliferation in public life of the semi-literate *petite bourgeoisie* were concerns which undergirded *Junimea*'s cultural pessimism. The newly born modern Romanian state produced a mushrooming periodical press that both disseminated mainstream literary productions—such as those of Alecsandri and Eminescu—and served as a battleground for political confrontations. As Alex Drace-Francis writes, “in the heady world of *fin-de-siècle* Romania, where everybody scrambled to be a journalist and the press laws were among the freest in Europe,” *Junimea* carried out a quality censorship.<sup>56</sup> They reacted against the falsification of culture and the excessive politicization of a society unprepared but eager for democracy. Culturally and politically inept, the semi-literate Romanian bourgeoisie became ridiculous actors in a democratic comedy—Caragiale's “political cretins” who “have deformed their most everyday speech.”

As Monica Spiridon notes, the import of the French Revolution in Romania had “a striking theatrical dimension”. Politicians and the body politic alike imitated the dramatic atmosphere of the Great Revolution often with farcical outcomes.<sup>57</sup> Caragiale sketched this hilarious world convulsed by nationalism, democracy, modernization, and mass media with unforgiving sarcasm. A member of *Junimea* and a very active social commentator, the playwright transposed Maiorescu's theory in a virulent dramatic charge against kitsch, dilettantism, and hypocrisy. By drawing attention to the absurdities of national invention, Caragiale complements Maiorescu's analysis:

Naturally [sic]. The young state, established according to circumstances, is in urgent need of a society. The improvised state, instead of being a form (a space) for equilibrium of the social forces at a given time, tries to generate those forces. Whereas the state should be the natural result of society, we realize that society is the artificial product of the state. The improvised state, feeling that it has no support (it is walking on air), immediately needs support to carry the weight of its step; it needs a society for its own comfort, to assure itself that its existence has a reason more substantial than the (unfaithful) fleeting luck of a few moments. Because the state does not have subjects to put forward reforms it has to think about them itself; because it does not have a society to ask according to its needs, the state makes up the social needs for whose satisfaction it legislates by approximation. It is hoping without tiring that it will itself yield a society. Where the effort of the state to

---

and 1914. He served as Minister of Public Education (intermittently 1874-1891), Minister of Foreign Affairs (1910-1913) and Prime Minister (1912-1913), among other public positions.

<sup>56</sup> Alex Drace-Francis, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture: Literacy and the Development of National Identity* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), pp. 172-73.

<sup>57</sup> Spiridon, p. 151.

produce a society in haste becomes not impossible but straightforwardly absurd is on the moral and intellectual plane. The state can legislate and implement the execution of another three bridges on the Danube, thirty ships on the sea, three hundred thousand army contingents and so on and so forth; this is possible but art, literature, philosophy! For these products of human spirit – something more than a political state is needed – a society consolidated by time.

Such a society, following this century's political developments in Europe, we don't have. Today we only have a growing and ever so variegated and heterogeneous motley of people. This disorganized assembly which changes its physiognomy every day, which cannot conceive of more important needs than the individual ones, which cannot have a tradition, and consequently under no circumstances consensus of thought and feeling, is very far from what is understood by 'consolidated society'. This world resembles a vast fair in which everything is improvised, everything ephemeral, nothing properly established, nothing durable. In fairs precarious shacks are built for a very short time, not durable monuments to last and be useful to others than their constructors. Art, literature, philosophy – these are monuments which a world like ours today could neither be able nor have reason to build. <sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> I. L. Caragiale, "Politica si Cultura" [Politics and Culture], in *Opere* (Bucuresti: Cultura Nationala, 1932), pp. 93-100 (pp. 95-96).

Fireste. Statul tanar, infiintat dupa imprejurari, are nevoie grabnica de o societate. Statul improvizat, in loc de a fi forma de echilibru a fortelor sociale la un moment dat, cauta sa fie izvorul nascator al acelor forte. De unde statul ar trebui sa fie rezultatul natural al societatii, ne pomenim ca societatea trebuie sa fie produsul artificial al statului. Statul improvizat, simtind ca paseste in gol, are nevoie numai decat de un razim pe ce sa-si puna piciorul; ii trebuie neaparat o societate, pentru linistea lui, pentru asigurarea fata cu el insusi ca existenta lui are o ratiune mai temeinica decat norocul, poate necredincios al catorva momente. Neavand asadar pe cine sa-i impuna lui reforme se gandeste el mereu la dansule; neavand o societate care sa-i ceara ceva dupa nevoile ei, inchipuieste el niste nevoi sociale carora le decreteaza pe dubuite satisfacerea. El spera si nu oboseste a spera ca va face sa rezulte dela dansul o societate.

Unde insa sarguinta statului de a infiinta in prisa o societate devine nu imposibila, ci chiar de-a dreptul absurda, este pe terenul moral si intelectual. Statul poate decreta si face sa se execute inca trei poduri pe Dunare, treizeci de vapoare pe mare, trei sute de mii de armata si asa mai departe; asta se poate; dar arta, literatura, filosofie! Pentru aceste productiuni ale spiritului omenesc trebuie – ceva mai mult decat un stat politic – o societate asezata de pe vremuri.

O asa societate, in urma prefacerilor politice din Europa in secolul acesta, nu avem. La noi n'avem azi decat o stransura de lume din ce in ce mai mare, mai impestritata si mai eterogena. Aceasta stransura de navala, care-si schimba fisionomia in fiecare zi, care n'are nici vre-o nevoie mai presus de cele individuale, care nu poate avea o traditie, si prin urmare in nicio imprejurare unitate de gandire si de simtire, este departe de a fi ceea ce se intelege prin cuvintele << societate asezata >>. Lumea aceasta se aseamana cu un vast balciu, in care totul e improvizat, totul trecator, nimic infiintat de-a-binele, nimic durabil. In balciuri se ridica barace subrede, pentru timp foarte marginit, nu monumente durabile, cari sa mai ramana si sa foloseasca si altora decat acelor ce le-au ridicat. Arta, literatura, filosofie, - astea sunt

Caragiale's attachment to the conservative vision of organic development is evident in the rhetoric of the text, which starts tellingly with the ratification of the natural order. It consequently builds its argument around the dichotomy natural vs. artificial, and is particularly troubled by the hybridity and transience of national formations which Caragiale qualifies as absurd. Essentially, the playwright reiterates Maiorescu's critique of "empty forms", stressing the carnivalesque character of the national landscape. Whereas rapid progress was possible with technology and infrastructure, and the state could just about improvise a civil society, learned culture could not be falsified, Caragiale claims. For all the shortcomings of the national project, Caragiale condemned the Francophone liberals of the 1848-generation who were the moral authors of the improvised state.

The critique of the forty-eight ideology which underpinned the foundations of the young state was part of *Junimea's* agenda. Maiorescu described the programme of the 1848 revolution as a "work of fantasy", "a naïve jotting down on paper of an amalgam of nebulous ideas".<sup>59</sup> The liberal-democratic pronouncements of the French revolution adopted by the Romanian revolutionaries-cum-national elites were to become empty words in sterile political battles.<sup>60</sup> Demagogy and corruption, a phenomenon Rădulescu-Motru calls "politicization", turned the ideals of the revolution into a farce. Because of the fundamental incompatibility between political system and society, that is, Romanian citizens were not sufficiently versed in politics to be able to exercise their rights discriminately and so politicians were able to manipulate the masses and employ ideology for personal motives. The phenomenon is, in Rădulescu-Motru's view, typical of young "unformed" cultures and was also related to the obsessive desire to please and resemble Europe. He uses Brătianu's humiliating prostration in the memorandum to Napoleon III to substantiate his claim.<sup>61</sup>

Characteristically, Caragiale's indictment of the *bonjouristes* is extremely caustic. His incisiveness was compounded by the inauspicious context of the 1907 peasant revolt: "It's the bankruptcy of a whole system; it's the fatal consequence of the sacred Constitution

---

monumente pe cari nici nu poate, nici n'ar avea de ce, sa le ridice o lume cum e cea de astazi de la noi.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Hitchens, p. 62.

<sup>60</sup> Jianu, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Rădulescu-Motru, pp. 3-5.



with which we were gifted in 1866, after a night of boozing and translation from Belgian, by the Jacobine caricatures from 1848.”<sup>62</sup> In the playwright’s analysis, the land ownership problems that brought about the blood-quelled peasant revolt of 1907 were a direct consequence of the legislation and policies pursued by the liberal governments. The bankruptcy of the political system established by the liberals was mirrored by the degeneration of language. The liberal rhetoric had “a bizarre eloquence consisting of expressions as high-sounding as they are miraculously inept, gathered from an inexhaustible storehouse of the most arrant nonsense,” as Ionesco put it. The incompatibility between political form and historical reality undermined both the political project and the linguistic community.

Ionesco’s reading of Caragiale’s theatre as investigations into linguistic pathology strongly resonates with an article Maiorescu published in 1873, suggestively titled “The Inebriation with Words: A Study of Literary Pathology.” Maiorescu’s description of a decadent trend in Romanian culture, what he calls “inebriation with words,” clearly ties in with ideas explored artistically by Caragiale, but it is also no less than an intuitive anticipation of Ionesco’s linguistic experiments:

The first symptom is an avalanche of words, well in excess of what is needed in order to clothe the spirit [or idea]. Soon a second symptom becomes apparent amounting to the elimination of any idea and the use of empty words [or pure verbiage]; then the empty tone [or sound] of the vowels and consonants dazes the mind of the writer or speaker, the words flow in a naïve confusion and the brains are stirred only by the incessant vibrations of the acoustic nerves. Afterwards comes the obvious weakening of the intelligence: the loss of any logical thread, contradictions in ideas laid side to side, the unjustified violence of language.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Caragiale, *Despre Lume, Arta si Neamul Romanesc*, p. 95.

E falimentul unei intregii sisteme; e urmareea fatala a sacrei Constitutiuni, cu care ne-au daruit in 66, dupa o noapte de chef si de traducere din belgieneste, caricaturile jacobine de la 48.

<sup>63</sup> Maiorescu, “Betia de Cuvinte” [The Inebriation with Words], in *Critice*, I, pp. 219-35 (pp. 220-21).

Primul simptom este o cantitate nepotrivita a vorbelor in comparare cu spiritul caruia vor sa-i serveasca de imbracaminte. In curand se arata al doilea simptom in departarea oricarui spirit si in intrebuintarea cuvintelor seci; atunci tonul gol al vocalelor si consonantelor a uimit mintea scriitorului sau vorbitorului, cuvintele curg intr-o confuzie naiva si creierii sunt turburati numai de necontenita vibrare a nervilor acustici. Vine apoi slabirea manifesta a inteligentei, pierderea oricarui sir logic, contrazicerea gandurilor puse langaolalta, violenta nemotivata a limbajului.

Starting with an approximate quotation from Darwin's iconic *The Descent of Man* which describes the effects of alcohol on monkeys, Maiorescu introduces the concept of "inebriation with words" in mock-scientific fashion. Hence the somatic metaphors which explain the aetiology of this cultural malaise. The pathological simile satirizes the empty verbiage and ineptitudes of the editors of *The Contemporary Review*, whom the article tackles in the following paragraphs. Whereas the article addresses primarily the bad journalistic and literary practices in the proliferating newspapers, reviews and presses, it also echoes *Junimea*'s critique of the liberals' phony rhetoric.

Maiorescu's charge is no doubt a poignant reflection on the vitiation of language at work in ideological cant and the failures of the national project. Although a pertinent critique of the national project, it is underpinned by essentially elitist ideas and fears not uncommon to other modernist reactionary attitudes.<sup>64</sup> Maiorescu imagines a linguistic apocalypse whereby thought is vitiated by democratic garrulousness and a pathologic compulsion to vocalize annihilates signification. Distorted language, furthermore, triggers faulty epistemological processes which instantiate a crooked world. Hence the divorce between meaning and sound. In a cultural climate in which the standardization of the Romanian language was effected on political lines and literature could not extricate itself from national issues, sensitivity to the dislocation of language was thoroughly justified.<sup>65</sup>

The implications of the linguistic decay described by Maiorescu can, however, reach further to provide an explication of Ionesco's experimental forms. Ionesco took over *Junimea*'s concerns about the falsification of language for political reasons and transposed it at the formal level. The playwright's commentary on *The Bald Soprano* would constitute a fitting appendix to Maiorescu's article establishing a direct link between the critical trend in Romanian culture and Romanian avant-garde:

I imagined I had written something like the tragedy of language! . . . It is above all about a kind of universal petite bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeois being a man of fixed ideas and slogans, a ubiquitous conformist: this conformism is, of course, revealed by the mechanical language. The text of the *Bald Soprano* . . . consisting as it did of ready-made expressions and the most threadbare clichés, revealed to me all that is automatic in the language and behaviour of people: "talking for the sake of talking," talking because there is nothing personal to say, the absence of any life within, the

---

<sup>64</sup> Rădulescu-Motru, for example, links pseudo culture to hasty modernization, the social mobility promoted by democracy and kitsch, and the sham rhetoric of industrial advertisements.

<sup>65</sup> Ibrăileanu, pp. 20-26.

mechanical routine of everyday life . . . The Smiths and the Martins no longer know how to talk because they no longer know how to think.<sup>66</sup>

What illuminates this unexpected affinity further is the context of Maiorescu's article. "The Inebriation with Words" tackles the deterioration of Romanian language and the debasement of high culture in the logorrheic tirades of journalists. With cutting irony and entertaining verve, Maiorescu hunts stylistic ineptitudes, pleonasms, inaccurate quotations and attributions, gross conceptual errors, and grotesque linguistic infatuation. Maiorescu's use of slapstick and farcical irony, well outside the proprieties of rigorous criticism, is a powerful precedent in an iconoclastic tradition capitalizing on nonsense:

Darwin tells us that several species of monkeys are inclined towards drinking tea, coffee, and spirits: "They are capable," he says, "of smoking tobacco with much enjoyment too, as I have seen myself. Brehm recounts that the inhabitants of West Africa catch wild baboons by placing in their favourite spots bowls of beer on which they get drunk. He saw several monkeys in this state and he gives us a very humorous description of their behaviour and the strange grimaces they made. The following day they were in a bad mood and had a hangover, they were holding their heads with both hands and displayed a heartbreaking demeanour. If they were offered beer or wine, they shrank in disgust, but they like lemon juice. An American monkey, an ateles [spider monkey], after having once got drunk on brandy, refused to drink it again and was consequently more reasonable than many people."

This means that our propensity for [or pleasure in] artificial dizziness caused by plants and their derivative products is founded on an ancient disposition common to us and other close relatives, to the monkeys, for example, whose descendants we are. . . . Yet there is a kind of intoxication special for the extraordinary way in which it is induced that appears to be the exclusive privilege of men as opposed to other animals: it is the inebriation with words.<sup>67</sup>

An example of the type of irony Rădulescu-Motru calls *zeflemea*, this mock-scientific exposition has hilarious effects. The implied analogy between Maiorescu's fellow-journalists

---

<sup>66</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>67</sup> Maiorescu, "Betia", p. 219.

Darwin ne spune ca multe soiuri de maimute au aplecare spre bautura ceaiului, a cafelei si a spirtoaselor; "ele sunt in stare, zice el, sa fumeze si tutun cu multa placere, precum insumi am vazut. Brehm povesteste ca locuitorii din Africa de miazanoapte prind pavianii cei salbatici puindu-le la locurile unde se aduna vase pline cu bere, de care se imbata. El a vazut mai multe maimute in aceasta stare si ne da o descriere foarte hazlie despre purtarea lor si despre grimasele ciudate ce le faceau. A doua zi erau foarte rau dispuse si mahmure, de durere isi tineau capul cu amandoua mainile si infatisau o privire din cele mai duioase. Daca li se oferea bere sau vin, se departau cu dezgust, dar le placea mult zama de lamaie. O maimuta americana, un atele, dupa ce se imbatase o data cu rachiu, n-am mai vrut sa-l mai bea si a fost, prin urmare, mai cuminte decat multi oameni."

and Darwin's monkeys and the contrast between scientific jargon and its calumnious function make the passage riotous reading.

Contrary to our expectations, the quotation from Darwin's study—very recent at the time – is fairly accurate, yet paraphrased to maximise the humorous effects when inserted in the article as a very witty prank on the targeted semiliterate journalists. Darwin's study had been published only two years before, and judging by the article's approximate rendition, it had not been translated into Romanian when the article was written.<sup>68</sup> It was a nasty barb aimed at his opponents, the editors of *The Contemporary Review*, who in all probability (and according to Maiorescu's assessment of their ignorance) would have been at once intimidated and humiliated by this reference. The prank was followed by a heated exchange. Predictably hurt by Maiorescu's pamphlet, his targets accused him of lack of professionalism and deemed his literary manners to be akin to those of an itinerant salesman. Maiorescu dismissed their accusations and counterattacked with the following:

What about those phenomenal information slips . . . , those small errors scattered in a slightly biggish proportion in the first two numbers, the reference numbers of a *Review* of art, literature, and science, published in the year 1873 in the capital of a state that aspires to culture and does not entirely lack literary life?<sup>69</sup>

Ionesco later blamed the pseudointellectuals targeted by Maiorescu for the horrors of totalitarianism. In 1873, however, these buffoon rhinoceroses were still rather inoffensive. Their clumsy feet were only trampling the exigencies of art and science. Maiorescu delineates the pathology of a young state with a flimsy written culture heavily borrowing from the West to make up for its own compromising lack. But hasty cultural improvisation gave rise to aberration and kitsch. In political terms, immature democracy can degenerate into "political cretinism," as Ionesco calls it, an absurd preoccupation with politics, the vitiation of meaning and any genuine thinking by propaganda. Caragiale, with his impersonation of imbecile protagonists drunk with words, exposes the same problems, as Ionesco explains:

---

<sup>68</sup> The full translation of the study was only published in 1967 as *Descendentă Omului și Selectia Sexuală*, trans. Eugen Margulius et al. (Bucharest: The Romanian Socialist Academic Press, 1967).

<sup>69</sup> Maiorescu, "Răspunsurile 'Revistei Contemporane'. Al Doilea Studiu de Patologie Literară" [The Answers of *The Contemporary Review*. The Second Study of Literary Pathology], in *Critice*, I, pp. 236-41 (pp. 237-38).

Caragiale's chief originality is that all his characters are imbeciles. . . . They are the heirs and beneficiaries of those revolutionaries, heroes, luminaries, and philosophers who have convulsed the world with their ideas; they are the result of this convulsion. . . . What is depressing is that the ideas themselves, seen through this intellectual world, are degraded and lose all significance so that in the end everything is compromised, both men and ideologies.<sup>70</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The failures and deviations of democracy constitute the backdrop of the Romanian avant-garde with their contempt for bourgeois complacency and stupidity. The avant-garde had the impossible task of articulating a critique of the unnameable social and political malaise mirrored by the degeneration of language. As Ionesco put it, "What is sometimes labelled as absurd is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language empty of substance, sterile, made up of clichés and slogans".<sup>71</sup> The momentous collapse of democracy and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, which Ionesco called "the 'rhinocerization' of society," revealed the dangers inherent in language. In this mortal battle of words, the absurd—that journey to the limits of expression—was exposing the disease gnawing at the core of language and humanity.

The young Romanian state offered a cultural landscape of disjuncture and creativity that gave modernism a different edge. Incompleteness, simultaneity, nationalism, and hybridity pushed modernism in a more radical direction. Romanian artists had to circumvent the ploys of nationalism and Eurocentrism in order to find an authentic and legitimate voice. As Ionesco's reading of Caragiale reveals, literature was so imbricated in politics that reading it outside the complicated issues of nation-building provides only a perplexing and limited view. The experience is perhaps comparable with Ionesco's claim that the world was utterly incomprehensible to him, hence his attempt to impart his disorientation to his audience. His heroes are the products of Romanian history, which once unpacked could ease or at least inform the confusion he relays. We are beginning to fathom the historical and ontological premises of this confusion. This excursion through Romanian history also recontextualizes Ionesco's achievement as a French writer. His voluntary exile appears, in the light of Romania's political conception in France, as a much-awaited although strange homecoming, retracing the journey of his forefathers, the 1848 revolutionaries. As this

---

<sup>70</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 139.

<sup>71</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 46.

chapter demonstrates, behind the seemingly opaque forms of the Romanian avant-garde there is a thick web of unread references, a complicated history of cultural debates in which the writers and their artistic projects participate.

### Chapter 3: An Absurd Rendezvous. Ionesco, Caragiale, Tzara

The first *Spectacle Ionesco* at the Théâtre de la Huchette was staged in August 1953, under the direction of Jacques Polieri. The programme included Eugène Ionesco's translation of Ion Luca Caragiale's *Căldură Mare*, which became *Les Grandes Chaleurs*.<sup>1</sup> Caragiale's sketch was such a befitting addition to Ionesco's *Sept petits sketches* included in the show that it could barely be distinguished from the rest of the show. *Căldură Mare*, written in 1899 and included in the first edition of Caragiale's *Complete Works*, anticipates many features of the theatre of the absurd. Under the torrid sun of a canicular Romanian summer, cognition and sociability disintegrate. The protagonists lose control over words. Vocables dilute and mutate meaning, thus preventing communication. The simple task of finding an address becomes a nightmarish challenge:

Mr: The master is not at home?

The Butler: Yes, but he ordered me to say he went to the countryside, if anybody asks for him.

Mr: You tell him that I came.

The Butler: I cannot, sir.

Mr: Why?

The Butler: The door is locked.

Mr: Knock so that he opens.

The Butler: But he took the key with him when he left.

Mr: So he left?

The Butler: No, sir, he didn't leave.

Mr: My friend, you are an idiot.

The Butler: No, sir, I am not.

Mr: You say he is not at home.

The Butler: He is at home, sir.

Mr: Didn't you say he left?

The Butler: No sir, he didn't leave.

Mr: He is at home then.

The Butler: No sir, but he didn't go to the countryside, he is just out.

Mr: Out where?

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 273.

The Butler: Downtown.  
Mr: Where?  
The Butler: In Bucharest.  
Mr: Tell him that I came, then.  
The Butler: What is your name, sir?  
Mr: Why do you care?  
The Butler: To tell him.  
Mr: To tell him what? How would you know what to tell him if I didn't tell you what to tell him? Wait for me to tell you first, don't rush! Tell him when he is back that he was sought by ...  
The Butler: By whom?  
Mr: Me.  
The Butler: Your name, sir?  
Mr: That's enough. He knows me, we are friends.  
The Butler: Very well, sir.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I.L. Caragiale, *Opere Complete: Momente, Schițe, Amintiri* [Complete Works: Moments, Sketches, Memories] (Bucharest: Minerva, 1908), pp. 207-208.

*Domnul:* Domnu-i acasă?

*Feciorul:* Da; dar mi-a poruncit să spui, dacă l-o căuta cineva, c-a plecat la țară.

*D.:* Dumneata spune-i c-am venit eu.

*F.:* Nu pot, domnule.

*D.:* De ce?

*F.:* E încuiată odaia.

*D.:* Bate-i, să deschidă.

*F.:* Apoi, a luat cheia la dumnealui când a plecat.

*D.:* Care va să zică, a plecat?

*F.:* Nu, domnule, n-a plecat.

*D.:* Amice, ești... idiot!

*F.:* Ba nu, domnule.

*D.:* Zici că nu-i acasă.

*F.:* Ba-i acasă, domnule.

*D.:* Apoi, nu ziseși c-a plecat?

*F.:* Nu, domnule, n-a plecat.

*D.:* Atunci e acasă.

*F.:* Ba nu, da' n-a plecat la țară, a ieșit așa.

*D.:* Unde?

*F.:* În oraș.

*D.:* Unde!?

*F.:* În București.

*D.:* Atunci să-i spui c-am venit eu.

*F.:* Cum vă cheamă pe dvs.?

*D.:* Ce-ți pasă?



The baffling repetitions and misfired dialogue of this sketch are aesthetic strategies Ionesco built on to consolidate his idiosyncratic style. Caragiale was so innovative that 50 years after it was written his play could match Ionesco's avant-garde theatre.

That Ionesco decided to have Caragiale's sketch staged alongside his own productions must have been an acknowledgement of his indebtedness to the great Romanian playwright. This important episode of late modernism and the strong affinities between the two playwrights remained in the anecdotal footnotes of literary history. Although several critics have signalled the continuities between Ionesco and Caragiale, their aesthetic and conceptual dimensions have not been thoroughly explored.<sup>3</sup> Why is Caragiale torturing his protagonists by refusing them the simple need of expression? What are the conceptual undergirdings of his innovative forms?

“One of the most interesting characteristics Caragiale's and Ionesco's theatre share is the revolt against making thought and expression uniform, materialistic and comfortably middle-class. Their works show that cliché, kitsch, and tyranny give rise to one another in small, easy steps”, Adriana Varga writes.<sup>4</sup> I want to probe further the local historical implications of Caragiale's critique and the ways in which this critique is inflected at the formal level. Caragiale's indictment of middle-class ideology was rooted in the particular circumstances of Romanian modernity – the belated creation of the nation-state and the emulation of French forms – even if it eventually converged with other European manifestations of anti-bourgeois critique. Understanding the critical content of Caragiale's

---

F.: Ca să-i spui.

D.: Ce să-i spui? de unde știi ce să-i spui, dacă nu ți-am spus ce să-i spui? Stăi, întâi să-ți spui; nu te repezi... Să-i spui când s-o-ntoarce că l-a căutat...

F.: Cine?

D.: Eu.

F.: Numele dv.?

D.: Destul atâta! mă cunoaște dumnealui... suntem prieteni...

F.: Bine, domnule.

<sup>3</sup> Adriana Varga, Alexandra Hamdan, *Ionescu inainte de Ionesco: Portretul Artistului Tanar* [Ionescu Before Ionesco: The Portrait of the Young Artist] (Bucharest: Seculum, 1998); and Dumitru Tucan, *Eugène Ionesco: Teatru, Metateatru, Autenticitate* [Eugène Ionesco: Theatre, Meta-Theatre, Authenticity] (Timisoara: Editura Universitatii de Vest, 2015), discuss Caragiale's influence on Ionesco.

<sup>4</sup> Varga, p. 131.

seemingly more traditional dramaturgy will illuminate the important aesthetic mutation at work in the theatre of the absurd.

In this chapter I will examine the sources of Caragiale's aesthetic in order to elucidate its affinities with the theatre of the absurd. My analysis focuses on the absurd as linguistic deconstruction and impasse, aesthetic strategies which both Caragiale and Ionesco employed in order to critique the status quo. I will start by revisiting Ionesco's reading of Caragiale and use it for a wider exploration of the social and political circumstances which triggered Caragiale's critique.

### 1. Sources of Caragiale's Theatre

When Michael Impey argued that Caragiale was one of the precursors of the theatre of the absurd, he also suggested that the Romanian playwright found inspiration in the French vaudeville first brought to the Romanian stage by Vasile Alecsandri.<sup>5</sup> Impey must have had in mind Alecsandri's *Chirița in Provincie* [Chirița in the Provinces], based on the famous French character Mme Angot.<sup>6</sup> This was the first Romanian play to dramatize Romania's "empty forms" and to stage what Caragiale termed *moftangiu* [humbug], that is the parvenu who peppers his speech with broken French and follows blindly the fashion of the day.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the vaudeville was a popular genre meant to amuse rather than illuminate its audiences, Alecsandri's and Caragiale's theatre engaged with issues which were critical for the Romanian culture then in the making. In line with *Junimea's* criticism, their theatre exposed the shallow and excessive imitation of Western forms and the incompatibility between Romania's Oriental heritage and the modernizing ambitions of the state.

Alecsandri, however, was only adapting the themes of famous French vaudevilles to the Romanian context for didactic purposes. He was, in other words, teaching the audience

---

<sup>5</sup> Impey, pp. 127-28.

<sup>6</sup> Scarlat Struțeanu, "Introducere", in I.L. Caragiale, *Opere Alese I. Teatru* [Selected Works I: Theatre] (Bucharest: Cugetarea, 1940), pp. 22-28 (p. 25).

<sup>7</sup> The comic results from the contrast between appearance and reality, between form and content. The characters' traditional education, lifestyle and mentality are at odds with the French language and fads. The obsession for European fashion emphasizes the backwardness and exoticism of the local landscape and culture.

to be good Romanians. It was Caragiale who transformed the genre and made it his trademark. He took over the themes and vaudeville form from Alecsandri's work and transposed them in an innovative aesthetic which anticipates the theatre of the absurd. More closely attached to *Junimea's* agenda, Caragiale's theatre satirizes the liberal ideology adopted by the founders of modern Romania and its social consequences. The plots and characters of his plays dramatize the many failures of the national project. His protagonists come from among the urban bourgeoisie which are either imbued with the liberal ideology or have unwittingly assimilated its effects: bombastic and false patriotism, pretentiousness, the smattering and theatrical emulation of French mores.

Caragiale's most important source of humour and originality is, however, the aesthetic transposition of *Junimea's* principles in the protagonists' speech, which is marred by redundancy, prolixity, logical lapses, and misappropriated and misspelled French jargon. His reworking of the vaudeville form in terms of plot (reversal of fortunes, mistaken identities, happy endings) and aesthetic strategies (the hyperperformativity of language, pastiche and discursive fragmentation) aesthetically inflected *Junimea's* critique of the hasty adoption of Western modernity.<sup>8</sup> The concept of "empty forms" is dramatized in Caragiale's oeuvre as linguistic and epistemological degradation or what Maiorescu wittily coined "inebriation with words". By this means Caragiale made an important step towards the modernist foregrounding of form.

Caragiale's formal transposition of *Junimea's* critique, as Ion Pop perceptively notes, also inspired the Romanian avant-garde's linguistic experiments. "And there is something else, maybe equally important for the location of a Romanian pre-avant-garde spirit", Pop writes:

The abovementioned example of Caragiale, incisive critic who became very influential due to his great comedies, and particularly because they illustrated Maiorescu's "empty forms" as misappropriation of progressive ideas and the deformed jargon which eschewed the reality it wanted to convey. [...] In the eyes of the Romanian Dadaists, the corruption of language, the dissolution of logic, the annihilation of meaning by way of a sterile and redundant language pervaded by clichés and speech mannerisms, undoubtedly owes a lot to the author of *Mr. Leonida Facing the Reactionary Forces*, for example, or *Les Grandes Chaleurs*.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See Jennifer L. Terni, "A Genre for Early Mass Culture: French Vaudeville and the City, 1830-1848", *Theatre Journal*, 58 (2006), 221-48 (p. 236).

It is this less acknowledged continuity between *Junimea*, the Romanian avant-garde and Eugène Ionesco via Caragiale's aesthetics that I want to explore. This provides a more profound basis for the Romanian tradition of hypercriticism under which Gelu Ionescu discussed this continuity on the basis of a common counter-canonical stance.

Having signalled so clearly his indebtedness to Caragiale, Ionesco was among the first to recognize the significance of his predecessor's aesthetic innovation. His translation of *Caldura Mare* was published by Fata Morgana in a limited edition illustrated with Ionesco's naïve drawings. This was, as Figure 1 attests, a token of Ionesco's by then iconic status. In the process of Ionesco's canonization, Caragiale finally reached Western readerships. In order to guide the readers unfamiliar with the Romanian context through Caragiale's aesthetic, the booklet included a text by Ionesco on Romanian literature. Ionesco explains:

Caragiale's universe is the hell of imbecility. Humanity appears subhuman, the existence of the world seems unjustified. And all this in a perfectly efficient language embodying the content, being the content itself: the speech of his protagonists faithfully represents them; it is a disarticulated, deteriorated language exactly like their characters, like the social world in which they live, a language deliberately confused and chaotic, the language of the journals of the time where all the big ideas are tangled up and terribly confounded.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ion Pop, *Introducere în Avangarda Literară Românească* (Bucharest: Institutul Cultural Roman, 2007), p. 27.

Si mai este ceva, poate la fel de important pentru a identifica o baza a spiritului pre-avangardist la noi: amintitul exemplu al lui Caragiale, critic acerb si de larg ecou public, datorita marilor sale comedii indeosebi, al acelor 'forme fara fond' maioresciene, ilustrate in preluarea rau asimilata nu doar a unor idei 'progresiste', ci mai ales a unui limbaj, el insusi deformat si ramas la suprafata realitatilor vizate, golit in mare masura de continutul sau, exploatat intr-o frazeologie retorica intr-atat hipertrofiata, incat ajunge sa-si piarda punctele de referinta reale, functionand in gol, in gura unor personaje ce par manipulate de propria productie verbala, automata si incoerenta. Compromitarea 'mesajului' in ochii, de pilda, ai dadaistilor porniti din Romania, dereglarea logicii, parazitarea 'sensului' de catre un limbaj redundant si steril, invadat de clisee si automatisme, ii datoreaza, fara indoiala, enorm, autorului *Conului Leonida fata cu reactiunea*, de exemplu, si al *Căldurii mari*.

<sup>10</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Littérature Roumaine*. The original text, which was commissioned in 1955 for *L'Encyclopédie Clarté*, is not available anymore, the encyclopedia having replaced it with a new text by Alain Guillerrou. It was later included in the pamphlet published by Fata Morgana alongside Ionesco's translation of *Caldura Mare*, this time as *Grosse Chaleur*. See Maria Lupas, 'Ionesco contre la littérature mineure? Le cas de la littérature roumaine', << <http://e-lla.univ-provence.fr/pdf/article53.pdf> >> [accessed 1 November 2013].

My translation from the French:

A very perceptive reader of Caragiale, Ionesco identifies the main concerns and tactics of his theatre: the caricatural nature of Caragiale's work, the modernist fusion of form and content, and the role of modern politics and media in the degeneration of language. The harshest critic of Romanian mores, Caragiale violently exposed the fallacies of the new petit bourgeois. The artistic transformation into caustic laughter of the playwright's reprobation is nowhere more evident than in language, as Ionesco accurately noted. Language indicts his characters even before they have a chance to misbehave. The protagonists are no more than the Francophone, phony, hypocrite, propagandistic, pseudo-literate, distorted parlance they conjure.

---

L'univers de Caragiale est l'enfer de l'imbécillité. L'humanité y apparaît sous-humaine, l'existence du monde semble injustifiée. Et tout ceci dans un langage d'une efficacité parfaite faisant corps avec le contenu, étant le contenu lui-même : les parler de ses personnages les reflète exactement, c'est une langue désarticulée, détériorée comme leur caractères, comme le monde social dans lequel ils vivent, un langage volontairement confus et chaotique, le langage des journaux du temps où toutes les grandes notions s'embrouillent, se confondent effroyablement.



**Figure 1:** Eugène Ionesco, *Littérature Roumaine*, illustrations de l'auteur, Fata Morgana 1998

As Ionesco justly points out, the disarticulated language of Caragiale's plays is the delirious cant of the newspapers, which were proliferating at a mad pace in *fin-de-siècle* Romania. In this, Caragiale reiterates *Junimea's* elitist reaction to the encroachment of low culture evident in Maiorescu's article on "the inebriation with words" and his aggressive indictment of poor journalistic practices. Wider access to education and the increasing availability of print facilities meant that more people participated in the production and consumption of culture, but also that the standards of culture, now more difficult to control, were plunging. The devaluation of culture triggered by democracy was, in fact, a common concern for modernists everywhere. As mass media was the main vehicle for both political discourse and popular culture, it became a favourite target for modernist counter-attacks.

Caragiale's relation with mass media, however, was highly ambivalent. Since his artistic career was slow to take off, Caragiale started off writing for liberal publications<sup>11</sup> His inside knowledge of liberal ideology and journalistic practices fed the comic reviews he edited, *Claponul* [The Capon] (1877) and *Moftul Român* [The Romanian Whim] (1893), among the most important. He mercilessly parodied the liberals and their newspapers. Despite his aversion, Caragiale ended up producing heaps of what he hated so much: mass culture. From 1873 to 1893 he contributed to and edited no less than twenty reviews. This extensive journalistic expertise migrated to his plays.

Not only did newspapers feature widely in his plays, which exposed the inanity of editors and the ignorance of readers, they also became an aesthetic formula. As Ioana Pârvolescu argues, corroborating Ionesco's reading:

Caragiale's formula, his *ars poetica*, is the newspaper. His comical works are written on print paper and make up a huge gazette with all the defects of the press of the time put together. There was, therefore, a reality deformed to a great extent by the contemporary papers. These journals were deformed once more, artistically, by Caragiale. The answer to these basic issues, the endurance of his comic oeuvre and the nature of the historical world he lived in, can only be one: the newspaper. This explains everything.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See Tudor Vianu et al, *Istoria Literaturii Române Moderne* [History of Romanian Modern Literature] (Bucharest: Casa Scoalelor, 1944), pp. 282-3.

<sup>12</sup> Ioana Pârvolescu, *Lumea ca Ziar. A Patra Putere: Caragiale* [The World as Newspaper. The Fourth Power: Caragiale] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), p. 91.

The multiple mediation at work in his plays is an early instance of the society of the spectacle. Based not on real characters and situations but on the human typologies and situations provided by the press or vaudevilles, Caragiale's theatre shuns realism in order to signal the existential transmutations brought on by mass media. In this respect Caragiale presciently anticipates the Karl Krauss of *Die Fackel*, Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord among other important critics of modernity. In an absurd reversal, newspapers distort reality rather than reflecting it and in the frenzy of reporting, any connection to a stable referent is lost. When the signified is so far removed from the signifier that the connection gives way, language collapses onto itself into a void of meaning. The linguistic collapse is compounded by the fact that reality itself gives way to spectacle: "News, propaganda, advertising, entertainment – the spectacle represents the dominant model of life".<sup>13</sup> "A separate pseudoworld", to use Debord's terminology, materializes. The borders, moreover, between world and pseudoworld become blurred, thus causing errors, misunderstandings, confusions, omissions, lapses and delusion.

Caragiale's characters are avid readers of the press. The newspaper is their Bible. They eagerly follow the new political developments in the principalities. Infected by the political enthusiasm of the liberals, they imagine themselves to be the protagonists of a heroic national drama. Their ideas, principles and perceptions of reality are framed by news reports and political pamphlets. The protagonists of the play *Conul Leonida Față cu Reacțiunea* [Mr. Leonida Facing the Reactionary Forces] are at an epistemological loss because they missed the day's paper. The political comedy pictures the sham life of the urban population crazed by Western democratic ideology. Since Western progressive ideas were very much in fashion and seen as an indication of one's sophistication and good character, Mr Leonida poses as a veteran revolutionary and committed republican, spending the evenings recounting his heroic past. In reality he is a faint-hearted and complacent

---

Formula lui Caragiale, arta lui poetica este ziarul. Opera sa comica este scrisa pe hartie de ziar, alcatuieste o mare gazeta cu toate defectele presei vremii, adunate laolalta. Asadar: exista o realitate care era deformata in buna masura de ziarele epocii. Aceste gazete sunt deformate inca o data, artistic, de Caragiale. Raspunsul la cele doua intrebari de plecare, despre rezistenta operei comice a lui Caragiale si despre lumea reala contemporana lui, este unul singur: ziarul. Asa se explica totul.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Canberra: Hobgoblin Press, 2002), p. 4.



middle-aged man who has not participated in the revolution and who does not understand much of republican political principles.

Cosily tucked in the matrimonial bed, he spells out the benefits of the republic to his second wife, Efimița: everybody will have a good wage “on an egalitarian principle”, pensioners will receive pensions and all debts will be written off. Leonida encapsulates the presumptuousness of the petite bourgeoisie emulating Western forms and donning fashionable ideas without proper understanding or genuine conviction. Woken up by noise from the street, the couple mistakes a mid-night brawl for a revolution. Leonida scrambles to corroborate the veracity of their experience in the daily newspaper. Since the revolutionaries were already in power, a revolution would have been improbable. The paper warns about a more imminent danger:

Leonida (lost): It’s not revolution, dear, it’s the reactionary forces; listen! (he reads trembling): “The reactionary forces are active again, like ghosts in the dark, they are on the watch sharpening their claws and waiting for the opportune moment to satisfy their anti-national urges...Stay awake, nation!” (desolate): And we are asleep, oh dear!<sup>14</sup>

The comic effect rests on the fact that Mr Leonida reads the inflated narrative of the paper literally. Besides satirizing the gullibility and obtuseness of the protagonists, the play exposes the incompetence and partiality of the mass media. What should be an accurate unbiased report of events is, in fact, alarmist liberal propaganda. That the exaggerated emotional effects of the language and the fabulous register grossly transgress the conventions of the news report form is a source of caustic humour. The uneducated protagonists take in the liberal rant undiscerningly, thus entering the spectacular pseudoworld projected in newspapers. Caragiale’s satire of the liberals’ inflated rhetoric is, of course, motivated by his conservative political beliefs, just as his distaste for newspapers is part of a wider critical reaction to technological modernity and mass culture.

---

<sup>14</sup> I.L. Caragiale, *Opere Alese I. Teatru* [Selected Works I: Theatre] (Bucharest: Cugetarea, 1940) p. 132.

Nu e revolutie, domnule, e reactiune; asculta: (citeste tremurand). “Reactiunea a prins iar la limba. Ca un strigoiu in intunec, ea sta la panda ascuntindu-si ghiarele si asteptand momentul oportun pentru poftele ei antinationale...Natiune, fii desteapta!” (cu dezolare) Si noi dormim, domnule!

## 2. Romania as Newspaper

Mass culture had a late and abrupt outset in Romania. Unlike other European countries where the quotidian press started flourishing in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, the Danubian Principalities had to fight cultural underdevelopment and political restrictions in order to express themselves in print. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that publications increased as part of the modernization efforts of the nation-state.<sup>15</sup> Low literacy, scarce resources and political censorship hampered publishing before independence. Especially after the failed 1848 revolution, the restored governments of Moldavia and Wallachia restricted the press to only a couple of titles per province.

The first publications which emerged after the revolution, due to a relative relaxation of restrictions in the late 1850s, was Alecsandri's *România Literară* [Literary Romania] and Mihail Kogălniceanu's *Steaua Dunării* [Danube's Star]. Both had a strong nationalist agenda and lobbied for the union of the principalities and independence. *România Literară*, whose nationalist agenda transpires from the title, supported the national cause by publishing Romanian folk poetry from across the regions.<sup>16</sup> The few newspapers that existed were the primary vehicles of the nationalist cause, which recruited all the intellectual and creative efforts of the principalities.

The opening editorial of *Steaua Dunării* [1855-1860], signed by Mihail Kogălniceanu, made this clear in an outline of the paper's priorities, which largely coincided with the principles and ambitions of the 1848 revolutionaries:

This journal is *The Star of Romanian Danube*; as a consequence, its politics cannot be but *the secular politics of Romanians*, the national politics which – to the honour of our journalists – is pursued and supported, with more or less talent, by the entire Romanian press without exception, politics encapsulated by the following words: the autonomy of the Principalities and the union of the Principalities.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Luiza Marinescu, "Modernitate Mediatică în Lumea Operei lui Ion Luca Caragiale" [Media Modernity in the World of Ion Luca Caragiale's Oeuvre], *Philologica Jassyensia*, 16 (2012), 87-100 (pp. 87- 88).

<sup>16</sup> Drace-Francis, pp. 170-71.

<sup>17</sup> Mihail Kogălniceanu, *Opere* [Works], ed. Dan Simonescu et al, 5 vols (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1974), I, p. 233.

Acest jurnal este *Steaua Dunării române*; prin urmare politica sa nu poate sa fie decat *politica seculara a romanilor*, politica nationala care – spre onoarea publicistilor nostril – se

Kogălniceanu describes the review's strong political inclination as part of a larger predisposition of the modern world:

Politics, as appositely delineated by a French journalist, has come to be the soul of the modern world; towards it aspire the great literary tendencies which formulate and disseminate ideas, and the industrial development which associates, organizes, produces and distributes. Politics is the strong circulation, which animates thought and action. In politics are grounded today all ideas. It is the source of all those waves of theories, projects and systems, which continuously assault the public opinion and propel the activity of the masses towards new ways.<sup>18</sup>

The supremacy of politics was, in Kogălniceanu's view, the mark of modernity, its soul. The metaphor echoes the Romantic patriotic rhetoric which pronounced Romania's emancipation a matter of the soul. Literature was, according to them, subsumed not to a utilitarian but to a metaphysical goal. The political pathos of liberal republicans like Kogălniceanu was often given to excesses.

Moreover, the opening up of the political and cultural arenas to ever larger constituencies did not always have desirable effects. The fact that all periodicals were dedicated to the national cause did not ensure consensus. There were, from the beginning, different claims and visions of the nation, and the attendant worries about its falsification or misappropriation. *Steaua Dunării* tried to implement its particular aesthetic vision of Romania, indicting what it considered to be deviations from the authentic national spirit:

We hate the Babylonian confusions, we hate ignorance and mediocrity hiding behind words which are high-sounding but empty of feeling; we believe we need an original, noble and national literature able to shape our mind and heart, a literature to show off to foreigners. This will not be accomplished by the heaps of poems without poetry, of translated novels and of anabaptisto-linguistic tracts which most of our current writers produce.<sup>19</sup>

---

urmeaza si se sprijine de intreaga presa romaneasca, cu mai mult sau mai putin talent, in sa fara exceptie, si cu aceeasi neobosita ravna si calduros patriotism, politica care se rezuma in aceste cuvinte: *autonomia Principatelor, unirea Principatelor*.

<sup>18</sup> Kogălniceanu, p. 235.

Politica, dupa nimerita expresie a unui publicist francez, a ajuns a fi astazi sufletul lumii modern; la dansa tintesc si largile tendinti ale literature, ce formuleaza si imprastie ideile, si propasirea industriei, care asociaza, organizeaza, produce si raspandeste. Politica este puternica circulatie ce atata toata gandirea si toata fapta. In politica se invarteste astazi toata idea. Din ea izvorasc toate acele valuri de teorii, de proiecte, de sisteme care bat necontentit in opinia publica si imping activitatea multimei spre cai noua.

<sup>19</sup> Kogălniceanu, p. 236.

Excesses, ignorance and mediocrity jeopardized the writing of the nation. Political principles, Kogălniceanu warned, although vital in nationalist literature, could not outweigh aesthetic criteria. The issues he exposes are already familiar from critiques by Alecsandri, Negruzzi and Maiorescu: the bizzareries of language reform and the excessive imitation of foreign models. *Steaua Dunării*'s manifesto set out the cultural coordinates of Romanian modernity: the importance of the press in shaping the nation, the subordination of art to politics, the strife to quell imitation of Western forms and the search for an authentic Romanianness.

When the first number of *Steaua Dunării* came out, in 1855, journalism was still a solemn affair, not least due to the scarcity of the press. But after the Union of 1861, when press control eased significantly, newspapers ran riot. In thirty years, a small town like Botoșani, which previously had no press, generated no less than forty-three newspapers, many of which were, of course, short-lived, but still an impressive number.<sup>20</sup> This was all the more so, as a large majority of the Romanian population was illiterate. For today's reader it is difficult to envisage the magnitude of the print explosion. By 1910 almost every possible social and political category and interest had its own organ. The catalogue of Romanian periodicals lists hundreds and hundreds of titles concerned with hygiene, fishing, agriculture, fashion, pharmacy, sport, music, production of spirits, anti-alcohol lobby, health (against alcohol, tuberculosis and syphilis), occult practices, genealogy, veterinary issues, blacksmithing and farriery, astronomy, aviation, stationery, bio-geology, railways and romance, alongside the usual tabloid, literary, artistic, patriotic, political, regional and ethnic minority papers. Judging by the low rate of literacy, it appears as if almost every educated person had his own printed voice, coach drivers, fishermen and commercial clerks included.<sup>21</sup>

---

Uram confuziile babilonice, uram ignoranta si mediocritatea ascunse sub cuvinte rasunatoare dar seci de simt: socotim ca ne trebuie o literature originala, nobila, nationala, insusita a ne forma mintea si inima, o literatura de care sa ne putem fali si inaintea strainilor. Aceasta nu ne va da-o niciodată pacotila de versuri fără poezie, de romane traduse și de tratate anabatisto-limbistice a celor mai mulți din scriitorii noștri de astăzi!

<sup>20</sup> Drace-Francis, p. 173.

<sup>21</sup> See George Băiculescu et al, *Publicații Periodice Românești. Ziare, Reviste, Gazete II* [Romanian Periodicals. Newspapers, Gazettes and Reviews II] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1969).

Newspapers became crucial in strengthening communities (the Bulgarian and the Jewish ones, for example), in building literary reputations and disseminating a more or less uniform modern Romanian language. They also represented a political battleground for Romania's newly founded and precarious democracy. More and more social categories, particularly the newly recruited state clerks and urbanized peasants, took part in reading and writing the nation. Newspapers got out of the hands of the elites in a haphazard transition to mass culture. Intellectuals like Alecsandri, Maiorescu and Caragiale fought back to contain the proliferation of what they considered pseudoculture. But since this was a democratic Romania and institutional control was no longer feasible, irony and ridicule became their standard critical tools.

*Claponul. Foiță Hazlie și Populară* [The Capon. Funny and Popular Slip] – the paper Caragiale set up in May 1877 – served exactly this purpose. Edited in its entirety by Caragiale, it came out at the height of the Turkish-Russian war of 1877-1878.<sup>22</sup> In this critical moment in the history of modern Romania, *Claponul* engaged with crucial events while also echoing the reaction of the popular press. The first number announced its profession of faith in reaction to the noxious effects of the print explosion:

During the ridiculous and critical times we have the honour of going through – when the question of the Orient is again out in the streets [...] when in Bucharest newspapers and papers keep coming out like mushrooms in the garbage after the rain; when every dink or rascal contributes with a slip of journal to the imperial dispute – why then not to bring to light *The Capon* – the funny bulletin of Oriental exploits? [...] On the other hand the public opinion filled its stomach with spears, bayonets, shells, projectiles and rockets: all the papers stuff it every day with *positive* news which bedevilled it. *The Capon* comes like sweets and coffee after a meal, to cleanse its palette.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Only issues no. 1, 2, 4 and 6 have been preserved in the archive of the Library of the Romanian Academy. The war implicated Romania on Russia's side and prompted its declaration of independence.

<sup>23</sup> I.L. Caragiale, "Profesie de Credință" [Profession of Faith] in *Claponul*, 1 (1877), 3-6 (pp. 3-5).

In vremea caraghioza si "de mare cumpena", prin care avem cinstea sa trecem – cand a iesit iar la maidan chestia orientului; [...] cand in Bucuresti ies mereu la gazete si gazetute, cum rasar ciupercile pe gunoiu dupa ploaie; cand fiecare ciocoiu ori ciocorofleac s'amesteca cu cate un petec de jurnal in cearta imperatiilor – de ce adica sa nu iasa la lumina *Claponul*, bulletin hazliu al intamplarilor orientului? [...] De alta parte opinia publica si-a incarcat stomahul cu suliti, baionete, ghiulele, torpile, obuze si cu toate hapurile de soiul acesta: toate gazetele o indoapa zilnic cu stiri *positive*, care au bagat-o in draci. *Claponul* vine ca zaharicalele si cafeaua dupa masa, sa-i dreaga gustul.

The author's aversion towards the democratization of the press is evident in the scornful rhetoric. Caragiale compares the hasty proliferation of the press to mushrooms growing out of garbage, thus alluding to unhealthy foundations and poisonous effects. The journalists are similarly portrayed as rascals. The word choice for street "maidan" [from Turkish = unpaved streets/area on the outskirts of the city] has derogatory connotations, indicating Caragiale's anti-democratic disposition. The implication is that the masses, particularly uncouth suburban constituencies, should not participate in political affairs. The sarcastic condescending tone is evident in the contrastive association of derogatory colloquial expressions (usually of Turkish origin) and a more formal register (scattered with Western neologisms). This is a pungent stylistic reminder of Romania's Oriental disposition, which belied its European pretensions. The superficial emulation of Western European forms rendered ridiculous results.

More than countering the incontinence and incompetence of Romanian journalism, *Claponul* was an anti-paper. Through titillating parody and pastiche it subverted the very idea of a paper. It promised, for example, to appeal especially to its own editors and to be read and appreciated even by those readers who could not read Romanian. "It comes out when ready from print", announced the cover page.<sup>24</sup> It also professed 33, 333 printed copies, "forty without one" editorial staff and the slogan "Cheap and good!". By borrowing the slogan of mass consumption – the buzzword of street vendors – Caragiale parodies the commercialization and vulgarization of the press. This idea is reinforced by the tongue-in-cheek distribution note: "Sale by sheet at kiosks and all street vendors, in the streets, markets, railway stations, restaurants, gardens, cake shops, pubs, everywhere; wherever you're not looking for it, you will find THE CAPON."<sup>25</sup> *Claponul* professed to be ubiquitous and superfluous like the worthless papers it ridiculed.

The entire content of this "rococo review", as it called itself, had a parodic function. News, editorials and features are all parodies of the genre. One of its favourite features are

---

<sup>24</sup> "Apare cand ese de sub tipar."

<sup>25</sup> *Claponul*, 1 (1877).

Vanzarea cu foaia: la chioscuri si la toti venzetorii de gazete, pe strade si pietee, in gari, cafenele, birturi, gradini, cofetarii, carciumi si pretutindenii: unde nu'l cauti, el gasesti pe CLAPONUL.

“Gogoși” [Doughnuts] – probably so called because in Romanian the word is used figuratively to designate lies or exaggerations – which consist of spurious news and made-up humorous sketches. The main feature of the first issue, the article “Răselul” [The War], is, for instance, rendered completely meaningless yet irresistibly funny by recurrent tautologies and logical lapses:

The war plan of the Russian army seeks to defeat the Turks – whereas of course the Turks’ objective is to beat the Russians. If the first case does not come true, the second will for sure....and if neither happens, then something else will happen – for something will happen anyway.

The Turkish ships travel the seas and when they don’t...they are in stand-by – whereas the Russian army is on the ground and when it does not rest... it travels. This worrying news caused sensation in the whole of Europe, which lost its appetite as a result, because there is nothing to eat – great crisis!<sup>26</sup>

The article is a perfect illustration of empty speech or “inebriation with words”. It also echoes the inconsequential exchanges of the theatre of the absurd. The mechanics of the absurd are evident in this deconstructing exercise; it becomes easier to trace Ionesco’s steps in between the lines. The tautologies and non-sequiturs of the piece are transferable to or from the plays and illustrate how Caragiale’s lampoon journalism informed his dramaturgy.

The sketches from “Gogoși” are aesthetically continuous with Caragiale’s theatre. Some of them have been developed into plays. The plot of the political comedy *O Noapte Furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] was first published as a sketch in *Claponul*.<sup>27</sup> Others provide material for comic moments on the stage. One of “the doughnuts” in the first issue reproduces the proceedings of a court case. An old lady is indicted in front of the court for refusing to pay her debts. When the judge asks why she refuses to pay, the old lady invokes “the pickles’ law”, which she claims, forbids citizens to pay their debts.<sup>28</sup> In *Mr Leonida Facing the Revolutionary Forces*, Leonida mentions the pickles’ law as one of the benefits attendant to the creation of the republic. The sketches, like Caragiale’s plays, dramatize the Romanians’ inability to comprehend the concepts and principles they harbour.

The fourth issue features, under the same rubric, mock-reports of Turkish parliamentary meetings which recreate the farcical atmosphere of the plays: nobody contests

---

<sup>26</sup> Caragiale, “Răselul” [The War], *Claponul* 1 (1877), 13-16 (pp.13-14).

<sup>27</sup> See Struțeanu in *Opere*, p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Claponul*, 1, p. 8.

the minutes of the previous meeting because the deputies are asleep, the speaker is teased and booed by the chamber before he begins delivering inanities couched in bombastic rhetoric. “Sirs, there are 5,415 years from the creation of the world; 1,294 from the Prophet; six months from the constitution”, the deputy begins. Then he tackles the heart of the problem: “I read and I re-read, and I noticed that, as a matter of constitutional law, nobody addressed, nobody resolved the issue of why one scratches himself when one has an itch.”<sup>29</sup> As in Caragiale’s dramaturgy, the humour derives from the contrast between reality and appearance, person and mask, form and content. The Turkish deputies are half-wits, boors, crooks and bullies who put on the dignified appearance of responsible politicians. As they try to mimic the gravity of the political discourse, their speech derails into nonsense. *Claponul*’s farcical elements anticipate both Caragiale’s theatre and the theatre of the absurd.

In avant-garde metacritical fashion, *Claponul* redirects mass media forms and capitalizes on scandal and self-fabrication in order to deliver its message. The editorial “Către Cititori” [To the Readers] in the second issue reports the resounding success of all 33,333 copies having been sold immediately. The demand for the last copies was so high that they sold at a fraction of their initial cost, according the nonsensical logic of the paper. Even those who could not read *Claponul* had a great time just by imagining its contents and celebrated accordingly. Particularly, two of its editors enjoyed reading their own articles so much that they did it again and again until they almost died of laughter.<sup>30</sup> The editorial, furthermore, announces the publication of *Claponul* as one the two most important events of the week, alongside Spain’s neutrality in the Turkish-Russian war. The two mock-news are subsequently mixed up so that *Claponul*’s editors receive the credit for Spain’s neutrality, whereas Spain’s Alfonso XII is congratulated for the publication and international success of *Claponul*.<sup>31</sup> Alongside the resourceful parody of advertising and journalistic forms, Caragiale’s creative employment of typographic conventions – as evident in Figures 2 and 3, which reproduce the front and back cover of *Claponul* – echoes later avant-garde practices. The hand with the pointed index finger appearing on the back cover of *Claponul* became, for instance, Dada’s distinctive mark.

---

<sup>29</sup> *Claponul*, 4 (1877), pp. 24-25. The scene of the constituency meeting in the play *O Scrisoare Pierduta* [A Lost Letter] reprises many of the comic elements in this mock-report.

<sup>30</sup> *Claponul*, 2 (1877), pp. 3-5.

<sup>31</sup> “Situatiunea Europei”, *Claponul* 2, pp. 11-18.





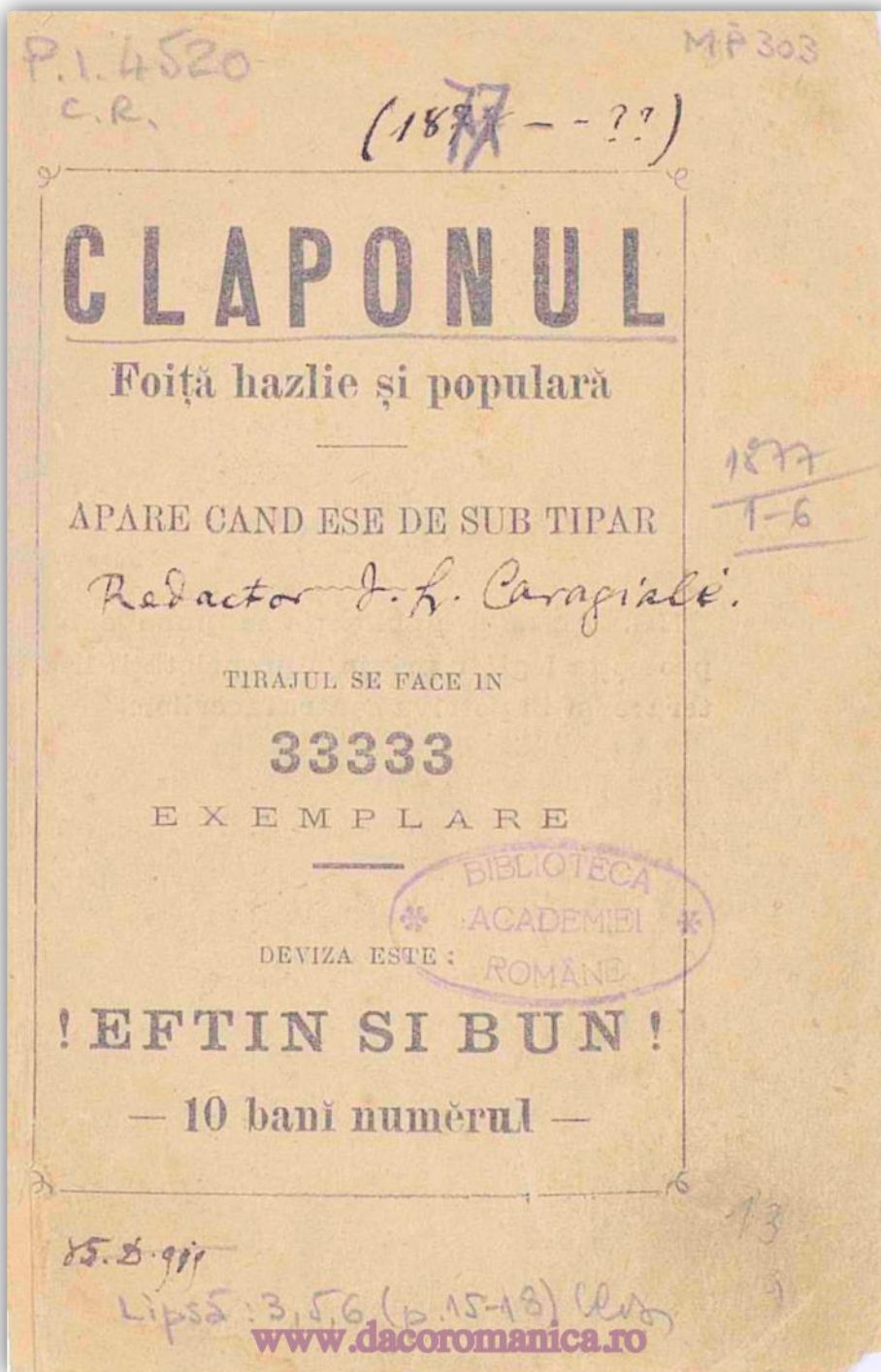


Figure 2 *Claponul*, no. 1 (1877), front cover.

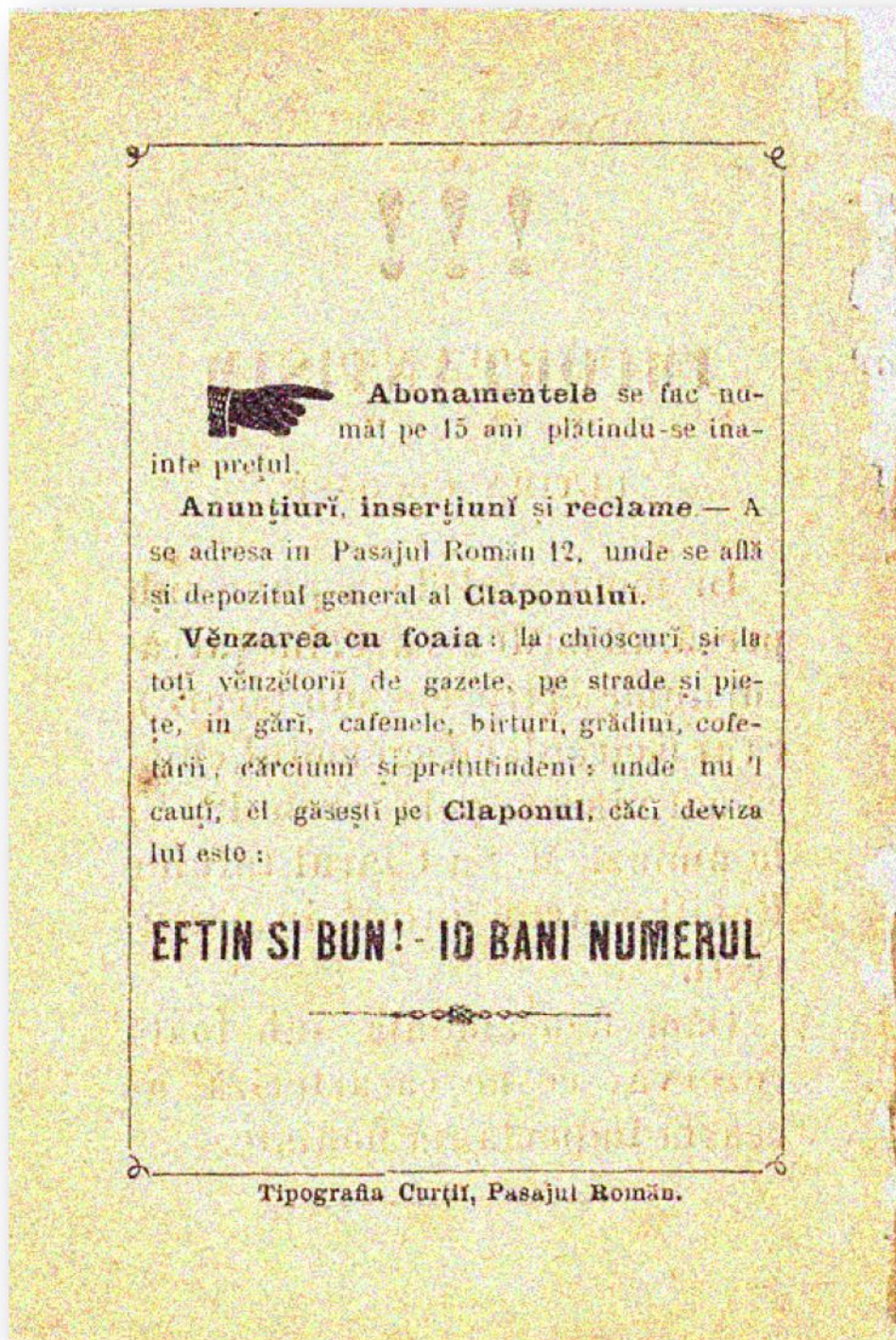


Figure 3 *Claponul*, no. 1 (1877), back cover.

### 3. Laughing at the Nation

*Claponul*, however, was only one of the many comic reviews which assailed the market. While the national project was fraught with many social and political problems, Romanians were well able to laugh at themselves and were getting better at it. Titles as diverse as *The Shoe* (Braila, 1910), *The Spinach* (Bucharest, 1909), *The Mosquito* (Bucharest, 1909-1910), *The Nettle* (Bucharest, 1907), *The Guinea Fowl* (Bucharest, 1907), *Nose Flips* (Orăștie, 1910-1914), *The Clown* (Braila, 1909-1910), *The Red Cockerel* (Brasov, 1874), *The Dragon* (1887), *Beelzebub* [Sărsăilă] (1889, Bucharest) are listed in the catalogue of Romanian periodicals. Among the most flamboyant was *Sfrânciogul Național* [The National Shrike] which, Alex Drace-Francis believes, was not far from Dada's preposterousness.<sup>32</sup> Set up by Constantin Niculescu and published irregularly until 1888 in Bucharest and Râmnicu-Sărat, the Satirical-Humoristic paper had the following protracted subtitle: *National, free-mongering, lobster-hued, cherry-coloured, purple, modish, ironical* [zeflemgiu], *cupboardering, hilarious, droll, salty, peppery, spicy, amusing, duty-stamped, perfected, collectivist, diurnal, Brătianist* [supporting the politician Ion C. Brătianu], *vizieral, ministerial, governmental, Carlist* [supporting King Carol], *spiritist, Dynastic, royal, satirical, empirical, humoristic, free-change-ist, free-thinking, free-standing, eager for subscribers and ever mindful of the salvation of the country.*<sup>33</sup>

The hilarious subtitle anticipates the equally hilarious agenda of the paper. What makes the extravagant list of qualifiers even funnier than the translation can convey is the lexical choice, a deliberate juxtaposition of neologisms illustrative of Romania's eagerness to adopt the Western intellectual fads and a colloquial lexicon of Turkish inspiration indicative of the country's Oriental heritage and anachronistic outlook. The subtitle ridiculed

---

<sup>32</sup> Drace-Francis, p. 173. The author suggests in relation to *Sfrânciogul Național* that "by 1890 the world of Tristan Tzara was not far".

<sup>33</sup> *Sfrânciogul Național* [The National Shrike], 5 (1888).

I have used here the translation in Drace-Francis, p. 173, with some minor adjustments after confrontation with the original:

Ziar naciunal, libergiu, stacojiu, conabiu, purpuriu, muchelef, zeflemgiu, dulapgiu, hazliu, nostim, sarat, piparat, piquant, amuzant, timbrat, perfectionat, colectivist, diurnist, Bratienist, vizirial, ministerial, guvernamental, Carlist, spiritist, Dynastic, regal, satyric [sic], empiric, humoristic, liber schimbist, liber curgetator, de sinesi statator, de abonati ravnitor si de salvarea patriei, pururea ganditor."

the incongruity of Romanian culture, the mismatch between form and content deplored by Maiorescu, which was manifest in language as well. Some of the Turkish terms are out of use now, mostly replaced by Latin-based equivalents, as for example “conabiu” [dark red or burgundy] from the Turkish “conabi”, or “muchelef” [elegant, smartly-dressed] from the Turkish “mükellef”.<sup>34</sup> Others, like those ending in the suffix ‘giu’ which is of Turkish import – libergiu [liberal], zeflemegiu [from zeflemea = mocker, scoffer] and dulapgiu – are pejorative or non-sensical. Rodica Zafiu argues that the suffix entered the language in a period of strong Turkish influence to be adapted and added to Romanian lexemes in order to create agent names, but like many Turkish words it acquired ironical and derogatory meanings.<sup>35</sup> Caragiale used this suffix to brand the Romanian snob *moftangiu* [from moft=whim]. Language thus developed an internal politics with allegiances, preferences and historical affect deeply embedded in its semantics.

According to Lazăr Șăineanu, the Turkish words adopted during the Phanariot period (during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) were often only adopted to supplement the already existing terminology. More than simple synonyms, they had ironic connotations and were used extensively for comic purposes. Due to the brevity of this period of influence, Șăineanu claims, many words of Turkish origin were not properly rooted in the language. Their foreign resonances fed the rich comic imagination of the culture, not least perhaps due to the inauspicious legacy of the Phanariots that left its mark on the collective psyche. Romanians, it seems, resisted the Ottoman domination through humour. Șăineanu associates this creative appropriation of Turkish words with the Romanian characteristic irony, *zeflemea*, which he believes to be a manifestation of local optimism.<sup>36</sup>

In keeping with Șăineanu analysis, a respectable term like “liberal” becomes the derogatory “libergiu” in *Sfrânciogul*’s subtitle, indicating a local farcical version of the initial concept. “Libergiu” is, in other words, the burlesque version of the liberal. The word

---

<sup>34</sup> DEX Online (Dictionar Explicativ al Limbii Romane) [Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language], << <http://dexonline.ro>>> [accessed 1 November 2103].

<sup>35</sup> Rodica Zafiu, “Pacatele Limbii: ‘Clipangiu’” [The Sins of the Language: “Clipangiu”], *Romania Literara*, 42 (2004) << <http://www.romlit.ro/clipangiu>>> [accessed 1 November 2013].

<sup>36</sup> Lazar Șăineanu, *Influența Orientală Asupra Limbei și Culturei Române* [The Oriental Influence on Romanian Language and Culture] (Bucharest: Socecu, 1900), pp. LXXII-LXXIII, LXIX.

*zeflemea* is also of Turkish origin [zevklenmek = light irony, mocking, mocking joke]. It already has a pejorative meaning, that is a rude type of humour. When the suffix “giu” is added to *zeflemea*, the derogatory connotation is aggravated. “Zeflemegiu” therefore means vulgar joker, somebody who cannot be taken seriously. “Dulapgiu” [from the Turkish ‘dolap’ = cupboard] appears to be merely non-sensical, though no less hilarious for that. The standard meaning, according to the initial use of the suffix, would be “somebody who makes cupboards” on the model of other profession names like “geamgiu” [window maker] or “barcagiu” [somebody in charge of a boat]. Yet it would not make much sense to call a newspaper a cupboard maker. In fact, the slang meaning of “dulap”, which is no longer in use, was “hoax” or “con”. In this case, “dulapgiu” would refer to a crook or a hoaxer.

Alongside the hilarious subtitle, *Sfrânciogul* had all the makings of an avant-garde publication, complete with an incendiary motto: “Light the torch and set fire”.<sup>37</sup> Yet the choice of word for “torch” – “masala” – a Turkish one with an old fashioned pejorative edge, makes the instigation less serious. It was more of a tongue-in-cheek iconoclastic statement indicating an intention to destroy and sabotage by way of ridicule. The metaphor could well refer to the scorching power of *Sfrânciogul*’s satires. The second motto is a mischievous paraphrase of the well-known aphorism: “You can if you will” as “You can scoff everything if you will”.<sup>38</sup> The penchant for Latin quotations is ridiculed in the adoption of Latin pseudonyms for the editors of the paper: Lucilius from Ramidava (the ancient Latin name for modern day Râmnicu-Sărat where the first numbers of the review were printed), Satirical Humoristic Director, and Pacuvius Terentius, Stingy Jokes Editor-in-Chief. The pedantry of the Latin names creates an ironical contrast with the impudent content of the mottos and the choice of colloquial expressions and indecorous Turkish words.

*Sfrânciogul* first number of 1887 even brandishes a manifesto proposing “to whip with laughter (*castigare ridendo*) the bamboozles, nitwittedness and the unbounded rapacity of the budget-phagous liberals”. To the question: “Why another humoristic newspaper? Don’t we have enough piquant, funny, entertaining and satirical (*blaguante*) papers?” The answer is that *Sfrânciogul*, as opposed to all other similar Romanian papers, is nationalist –

---

<sup>37</sup> *Sfrânciogul Național*, 2 (1887), p. 1. “Aprinde masalaua si incendiaza.”

<sup>38</sup> “Voeste si vei papa tot.”

an ironic sting with regards to the nationalist craze.<sup>39</sup> In fact, most journals claimed to be nationalist in one way or another. The aphorisms section includes witty paraprosokeians – a Dadaesque feature – which ridicule constitutionalism and the newly established legal jargon: “According to the civil law, which deems sacred all actual or de facto possessions, it cannot be denied that stupidity is the inalienable property of the person who owns it.”<sup>40</sup>

The address of *Sfrânciogul*'s editorial office is: the Ethereal Suburbs, Air Street No. 000, while the administration resides in the Devil's Dead-End Suburb, The Sylphides' Street. The press reviews appeared under the heading “The Newspaper Scissors” and the correspondence rubric announced “Depeși Electro-Cromo-Morpho-Microscopo-Telescopo-Fono-Telefonico”, that is “Electro-Chromo-Morpho-Microscopo-Telescopo-Phono-Telephonic Telegrams”.<sup>41</sup> This was two decades before the Futurists started sporting their fascination with technology. Niculescu's paper, conversely, does not take anything seriously, ridiculing advertising conventions and the penchant for technological innovation. Although a long way from Dada's merz collages, its custom-made ads are very imaginative and hilarious subversions of the genre. A particularly accomplished example advertises the Patriotic Stall where the fictitious wholesalers Țoboc and Zdrafcu sell all sorts of wound-inflicting contraptions.<sup>42</sup> On a quarter page the readers are invited to a Christmas Pageant (whose Romanian denomination is phonetically very similar to the word “treachery”, compare *Vicleim* and *viclenie*) featuring pantomimes of national figurines and marionettes. The show is on stock liquidation sale with free food and drink.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> *Sfrânciogul Național*, 2.1 (January 1887), p. 1. “pentru a sfichiui, radand (castigare ridendo] pehlivaniile, capsomaniile si nemasurata pofta de papat a libergiilor budgetofagi.”

Se va intreba negresit pentru ce inca un diar umoristic? N-avem atatea diare, piquante, amuzante..., dilectante si blaguante?? [...] Dar ne credem datori a va preveni ca diarul nostru este mai muchefel si are o preferinta asupra tutulor celor-l'alte diare de acelasi ifos, calibru si specie, prin particularitatea, ca *Sfranciogul* nostru este si *National*.

<sup>40</sup> *Sfrânciogul Național*, 1.2 (March 1886), p. 5. My own translation from Romanian:

Din punct de vedere al dreptului civil, care declara posesiunea aptuala (sau faptinica) de sfanta, nu se pote tagadui, ca prostia e proprietate nealienabila, a individului ce o poseda.

<sup>41</sup> *Sfrânciogul Național*, 18 (1888), pp. 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> *Sfrânciogul*, 2.1 (January 1887), p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Sfrânciogul*, 2.3 (18 January 1887), p. 4.

As expected from a satirical paper, *Sfrânciogul* has a strong anti-government agenda. Sceptical resistance to modernization and disillusionment with the national project are palpable throughout the paper. Liberal Prime Minister Ion Brătianu and Members of Parliament are ruthlessly ridiculed. In a piece concerning the introduction of inheritance tax, the lampoon describes their reactions to criticism against inheritance tax:

The cannibals from the Senate, got very upset, frowned more threateningly than Jupiter the Thunderous, and even the most reputable and loyal admirers of the virtuous regime, renowned for the prodigious flexibility of their spinal cord, became enraged. From hunchbacks they became upright like the pine trees from the Missing Peak, from humble and servile like the hermits of Saint Athos, they became proud and monumental like the Tarquins, from unconscious automata they suddenly became rationalist and censorious.<sup>44</sup>

The highly figurative vernacular clashes with the scientific sobriety of very recent neologisms to deliver a savoury lampoon. It ends in style with a mock hyperbolic and highly metaphorical panegyric dedicated to Brătianu. The irony is lethal.

The government led by Ion Brătianu is often bitterly criticized for the heavy taxes burdening the population. When the conservatives complain:

The government's answer to all these wails and lamentations is short and deft <<It is expensive but worthwhile>>. And the able Financier, Monsieur Na-Acu [Minister of the Exchequer between September 1885 – March 1888], whose past has to do with military gear shops, shouts in French **si vous voulez un Pays, payez**. In other words, as a paraphrase, if you want a Democratic-Collectivist-Opportunistic regime, reach deep in your purse and pay the taxes, for the national-flabby-eral [The words liberal and flabby have very similar phonemes in Romanian, the word pun suggesting corruption] slogan is: 'Health, joy and money to spend'. [...] Yes, blessed Sovereign People, the great deeds and national successes can only be achieved with money, Ergo, or thereupon, undo the straps of your purse.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> *Sfrânciogul*, 1.2 (15 March 1886), p. 1.

La aceste cuvinte cine ar fi crezut vreodata? Carjalii (from Turkish: soldier or cannibal) din Senat se posomorara urat, incruntara din sprancene mai reu decat Jupiter fulgeratorul, si chiar cei mai reputati ca adoratori fideli ai regimului virtutii, renumiti pentru prodigioasa flexibilitate a colonei lor vertebrale, se indarjesc. Din inconvaieti, devin drepti ca bradii din Varful cu Dor, din smeriti si umili cu shimonahii de la sfanta Agura, devin superbi si falnici ca Tarquinii, din automati inconscienti devin subit rationalisti si censoratori.

<sup>45</sup> *Sfrânciogul*, 1.3. (2 April 1886), p. 1.

Raspunsul obladiirii la tote aceste bocete sau lamentaciuni; este scurt si cuprinzator << Scump dar face>> sau obrazul subtire cu multa cheltuiala se tine. Iar iscusitul Finantiar de ceprezeasca memorie Mussiu Na-Acu, striga pe sfrantuzeste si vous voulez un Pays, payez. Cu alte cuvinte, cum s-ar prinde, de voiit obladiuire Democratic-colectivisto-oportunist, scormonitiva in punga, si platiti la dajdii, cacii diviza naciunal labartata suna astfel.



According to the editor, nationalism failed to achieve expected social improvements. The democratic ideals of the national project have turned into empty slogans, covering up political incompetence and corruption. Freedom changed hands with money and national principles with pecuniary interests. Concepts like sovereignty, nation or democracy were just highfalutin words in the national comedy featuring a German king and a puppet Prime Minister.

As is evident from its manifesto and the satirical lampoons, to begin with *Sfrânciogul*'s main targets were, initially, the liberals. Yet, in 1888 when the conservatives came to power and Maiorescu took over the Culture and Education Ministry, its satirical barbs were redirected against *Junimea*. The paper now called itself "Junimisto-Opportunistic" and "Humoristico-Progressist" and reported on Maiorescu's investment thus:

To the right of Mr. Petrachiță (Carp) was seated the freemasonic/shrewd (this is how the Priests call him) decorous, doct-issim, magnificent sir Titus Livius Majorescu Sehil Islam, the head of the teachers' society. [...] His Majesty had such a dour reactionary Austro-Hungarian physiognomy piercing with his virile glare Eve's daughters.<sup>46</sup>

All Maiorescu's biography is revisited and mocked at in four lines: his Transylvanian origins and German education, his alleged freemasonic connections and an adulterous scandal disproved in court.<sup>47</sup> The review thus reproves Maiorescu's inconsistency and double standards. In view of the critic's advocacy of disinterested aesthetics, his involvement in politics contradicted *Junimea*'s tenets and was therefore ridiculed as "opportunistic".

---

<<Sanatate, voie buna si bani de cheltuiala.>> [...] Da slavite Popor Suveran [...] ispravile cele mari, si isbandile naciunale, numai cu bani se pot savarsi, Ergo, sau prin urmare, deslegati baierile pungii.

<sup>46</sup> *Sfrânciogul*, 4.18 (16 November 1888), p. 2.

La dreapta conului Petrachita (Carp) sadea farmazonul (asa il numesc Pochi) ornatissimul, doctissimul si prestantissimul vir Titus Livius Majorescu Sehil – Islam, Glava obstestii dascalii, sau mai pe radical, delegatul la culte si instructiune publica.

<sup>47</sup> Maiorescu had been accused of an extra-marital relation with Emilia Claudine Rickert, the pedagogue of the Central School for Girls but the case was dismissed in court and his reputation restored. See Iacob Negruzzi, *Amintiri de la Junimea* [Memories from Junimea] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), pp. 38-51.

As this fierce criticism of Maiorescu shows, *Sfrânciogul*'s stance was consistently anti-establishment and its satirical charge did not spare either liberals or conservatives. The charge against *Junimea* is, however, surprising in view of affinities between the two. The April 1886 issue, for example, had featured an article on "Mammals", which closely followed Maiorescu's humorous take on Darwinism. The Darwinian prank had its antecedent in Maiorescu's 1873 article "The Inebriation with Words" and suggests possible sympathies with *Junimea*. This time, the study of animal behaviour provided *Sfrânciogul* with useful cues for the interpretation of political strategies:

The most capable male of the group is also its leader, as Brehm assures. The dignity of the chief is not conferred by way of universal suffrage. The male monkey does not acquire that dignity until after fierce fights with his competitors, which are the other male veterans of the group. In such fights, the longest teeth, the strongest arms, decide the victory. The one which does not surrender willingly, is defeated by way of bonks and bites. The crown belongs to the strongest. His expertise and wisdom reside in his teeth. The chief monkey exercises/bears his position with an abundance of dignity. The respect surrounding him bequeaths him an arrogant and pompous bearing his subalterns, which blow his horn in every possible way, lack.<sup>48</sup>

The critique is concurrent with Titu Maiorescu's stance, both in its sceptical outlook and sardonic style. Brehm's scientific study occasions an analysis of Romanian politics and belies the fairness and viability of democracy in Romania. The author uses the Darwinian evolutionist model to expose the unchanged nature of politics, which, in direct lineage from monkeys to humans, had always been based on power and abuse – contrary to modern pretensions of democratic rule. The humour again derives from the ironic juxtaposition of a scholarly scientific style of Western extraction and colloquial phrases and words of Oriental origin. The clashing semantic registers point to a Janus-faced culture, still bogged down in Oriental mores and terms yet entranced by the utopian promises of modernity. The Greek

---

<sup>48</sup> *Sfrânciogul Național*, 1.3. (2 April 1886).

Masculinul cel mai capabil al bandeii este și conducătorul ei, după cum asigură Brehm. Demnitatea de șef nu-i este conferită prin sufragiul general. Masculinul maimuțoiu nu-și însușește acea demnitate decât după lupte crancene, cu concurenții săi, carei sunt cei-alți veterani masculini ai bandeii. În asemenea lupte, dinții cei mai lungi, brațele cele mai vânjoase, decid victoria. Cel ce nu se supune de bună voie, este adus la ascultare prin buseli și muscături. Coroana aparține celui mai tare. Sfatul și înțelepciunea rezidă în dinții săi. Maimuțoiul șef exercită funcțiunea sa cu multă demnitate. Respectul de care este înconjurat de tinutele sale un ifos și un ighemonicon ce lipsesc subalternilor săi, care-l linguesc în multe chipuri.

words “ighemonicon” and “ifos” allude to a Phanariot mentality still active in Romania, if hidden by modern forms and institutions. The cultural mismatch, as with other extracts, reverberates at the linguistic level, where clashing or overlapping registers yield internal ironies and an underground dynamic of allusions and innuendos.

The affinities between *Sfrânciogul* and *Junimea* offer an interesting insight. Despite the latter’s fierce resistance, low culture contaminated their irreverent style while also taking over some of their strategies as Niculescu’s lampoon shows. Maiorescu and his fellows attacked their opponents and pseudo-culture more generally often resorting to colloquial expressions and crude satire inspired by popular culture. This tactic proved to be very successful. This intermingling of registers informed the style of Romanian critical discourse all the way from Alecsandri’s “Grotesque Dictionary” (in *Convorbiri Literare*, August 1869) to Caragiale’s perfect command of *zeflemea*.

#### 4. Whimsical Romania

In 1893, Caragiale started editing *Moftul Român* [The Romanian Whim], which targeted the snobbish scepticism of Romanian society. To have chosen this title for his new review was itself a form of *zeflemea*, literary critic Tudor Vianu writes.<sup>49</sup> Vianu’s claim is supported by the review’s subtitle: “National Spiritist Magazine: Bi-Weekly Organ for the Dissemination of Occult Sciences”. A term taken over from Turkish, where it simply means “for free” or “valueless”, *moft* held a particular appeal to the Romanians’ imagination and, abetted by Caragiale’s legendary ingenuity, came to designate a complex mind-set characteristic of *fin-de-siècle* Romania. In fact, judging from Caragiale’s ironic delineation of *moft*, it applied to almost all of Romania’s shortcomings. It was a sort of national brand.

The catchphrase of *Moftul Român*, as ubiquitous, capacious and ambiguous as Dada, is explained in the first number thus:

Whim, Whims!

---

<sup>49</sup> Vianu et al, p. 287.

O Whim! You are the seal and the slogan of our times. Vast syllable with boundless content, you hold so comfortably plenty of meanings: joy and sorrow, merit and infamy, guilt and fatality, right, duty, feelings, interests, beliefs, politics, cholera, typhoid fever, diphtheria, sybaritism, destructive vice, suffering, misery, talent and imbecility, spirit and spiritism, moon and mind eclipses, past, present, future – we, the modern Romanians call everything in one short word: WHIM.

Generally, the big nations each have a specific weakness: the English have the Spleen, the Russians – nihilism, the French *l'engouement* [infatuation], the Hungarians – chauvinism, the Spanish – the arrogance, the Italians – vendetta, etc; Romanians have the Whim!<sup>50</sup>

*Moftul*, ubiquitous and supremely expansive in Caragiale's skilful rendition, already had the brand appeal later cultivated by Dada. It might well be that Tzara and his fellow avant-gardists were inspired by Caragiale's experimental journalism, as Ion Pop suggests.<sup>51</sup> By way of protracted enumerations, paradoxes, contradictions and repetitions, the text echoes both advertising aesthetics and avant-garde strategies. The effect on the reader is one of hypnotic fascination and curiosity, despite the pervasiveness of the ironic undercurrent. In this context, *moft* is no longer just the Romanian word of Turkish origin. It acquires an entirely different dimension and starts a new and more exciting life as the vehicle for an iconoclastic aesthetics. But what exactly was *moft*?

In line with its avant-garde disposition, *Moftul*'s second issue features a fabricated chronicle of its mythology:

Moftul, it is said, is a small, tender and funny God, which was born out of the illicit love affair between FUN and JOKE. He is depicted as a young fair boy bearing the flower of Laughter in one hand, and in the other some big scissors: he waves the former under the noses of those who listen to him, while with the scissors he clips words. The abovementioned authors believe *Moftul* to be a beloved God whose cult

---

<sup>50</sup> *Moftul Român*, 1 (24 January 1893), p.1.

Moft, Mofturi!!

O Moft! tu esti pecetea si deviza vremii noastre. Silaba vasta cu netarmuit cuprins, in tine incap asa de comod nenumarate intelesuri: bucurii si neazuri, merit si infamie, vina si patenie, drept, datorie, sentimente, interese, convingeri, politica, cholera, lingoare, difterita, sibiritism, vitiuri distrugatoare, suferinta, mizerie, talent si imbecilitate, spirit si spiritism, eclipse de luna si de minte, trecut, present, viitor – toate cu un singur cuvânt le numim noi Romanii moderni, scurt: MOFT.

In genere natiile mari au cate un dar sau o meteahna specifica: Englezii au spleenul, Rusii nihilismul, francezii *l'engouement*, Ungurii sovoinismul, Spaniolii morga, Italianii vendetta, etc; Romanii au Moftul!

<sup>51</sup> See Ion Pop, p. 27, cited earlier.

was spread mainly by Romance populations; it has many temples, boys and girls, women and men and the elderly, offer him wild flowers, especially Parody, a multi-coloured, mottled flower.<sup>52</sup>

From this playful presentation, *moftul* appears to also be a comic God who generates words by clipping them with scissors, in haphazard Dada fashion, and provokes laughter. The allusion to adulterous love and the parody of cultish discourse are highly subversive. In its ubiquitousness, *moftul* seems to encapsulate both Romania's inadequacy and the comic mode most suited to ridicule and expose it. In fact, this latter is the *raison d'être* of Caragiale's paper – *castigare ridendi*.

*Moftul Român* set out to delineate what it believed to be a specifically Romanian existential mode. In this respect, it endorsed *Sfrânciogul*'s proclamation: "in the happy free-independent kingdom of Daco-Romania, things take a different, funnier, more burlesque, more grotesque turn".<sup>53</sup> Caragiale gives a full account of this *modus vivendi* and its adherents:

The *moftangiu* [the Whimsical] is eminently Romanian; despite this, before being Romanian, he is foremost *moftangiu*. Born in a poor yet honest family, he is the product of his own work, and although democrat by birth, he belongs to the aristocracy of intelligence, of merit, of the sciences, art, culture and so on and so forth.

Born in an old family of true boyars, who always put the interests of the country before class interests, renouncing their privileges, he – the true aristocrat – is the true democrat.

---

<sup>52</sup> *Moftul*, 2 (29 January 1893), p. 3.

*Moftul*, zic dansii, este un zeusor gingas si nostim, care a luat nastere din amorul din flori al *Hazului* cu *Gluma*. Ei il infatiseaza ca un baietel tanar si balaier purtand intr-o mana *Rasul*, o floare, si in alta niste foarfece mari: cu cea d'intai da pe la nasul celor ce-l asculta, iar cu foarfecele taie la palavre. Autorii sus-pomeniti privesc *Moftul* ca pe un zeu iubit, al carui cult a fost raspandit mai ales la popoarele de ginte latina; are multime de temple, baietii si fetele, femeile si barbatii, mosnegii si babele ii sacrifice flori de camp si mai ales *Parodia*, o floare multicolora si pestruta.

<sup>53</sup> *Sfrânciogul*, 2.2 (11 January 1887), p. 1.

Daca ast-fel stau lucrurile in patria Cimbrilor si Teutonilor, apoi in fericitul si liber-independentul Regat al Daco Romaniei lucrurile se petrecu sub un aspect mai hazliu, mai burlesc, mai grotesc.

The *moftangiu* is a determined patriot, exclusively nationalist, Romanian to the marrow! Everybody should know it!

Governmental, or, when unfortunately this is not possible, in opposition, the *moftangiu* congratulates Rrromania in the first case, he deplores it in the second case, in both cases he is madly in love with it. This is why, he passionately hates, everything, which is not Romanian, everything that is not national.

He praises agriculture but dreams of a great national industry to rid us of the tribute we are paying to foreigners: what frightens him is that infamous foreigners with the help of his country's step children might take over Rrromania's [sic] finances.

The *moftangiu* is to be found among all social classes. His species swarms all communication channels and is nesting in the grandest palaces and in the most modest *hôtel garni* room all the same. The *moftangiu* can have a profession or not, he can be rich or poor, stupid or smart, dumb or witty, young, old, of one or another sex, or both, he was, is and always be true Romanian. The Romanian *moftangiu* is:

Anarchist from the primary school until the baccalaureate;

Socialist from baccalaureate until the first university exam;

Radical-progressive from the first exam until graduation;

Liberal-democrat from graduation till the first job;

Conservative once he has got his job.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> *Moftul*, 3 (3 February 1893), p. 1.

Moftangiul este eminentemente roman; cu toate astea, înainte de a fi roman, el este moftangiu. Nascut dintr-o familie saraca, dar onesta, el este fiul operelor sale, si desi democrat prin nastere, el face parte din aristocratia inteligentii, a meritului, stiintei, artei, culturii scl..

Nascut dintr-o veche familie de adevarati boieri, cari au stiut totdeauna sa puna interesul patriei mai presus de interesele de clasa renuntand la privilegiu, el, aristocratul get-beget, este adevaratul democrat...

Moftangiul este patriot hotarat, nationalist exclusiv, roman pana in maduva oaselor! Toata lumea trebuie s-o stie!

Guvernamental, sau, cand din nenorocire nu se poate asta, opozant, moftangiul felicita Rrromania in cazul intaiu, o deplange in cazul al doilea, in ambele cazuri o iubeste pana la nebunie. De aceea, el uraste cu furie tot ce nu e roman, tot ce nu e national.

El stimeaza agricultura, dar viseaza o industrie mare nationala, care sa ne scape de tributul ce'l dam strainilor [...] Moftangiul se gaseste in toate clasele sociale; speta lui furnica pe toate caile de comunicatie, si e incuibata din cele mai mandre mandre pa'aturi pana in cea mai modesta odaie de *hôtel garni*. Moftangiul poate avea sau nu profesie, el poate fi sarac ori bogat, prost ori destept, nerod ori de spirit, tanar, batran, de un sex sau de altul sau de amandoua, el a fost, este si va fi Rrroman adevarat. [...] Moftangiul roman este: Din clasele primare pana la baccalaureat – anarchist; De la baccalaureat pana la primul examen de universitate – socialist; de la primul examen pana la licenta – radical-progresist; De la licenta pana la slujba – liberal – democrat; De la slujba'ncolo – conservator.

Caragiale creates the profile of *moftangiu* employing the usual paradoxes, tautologies and non-sequiturs. In doing so he stylistically mimics the inanities of his targets. In view of the added Turkish suffix “-giu”, with its derogatory charge, the type is appropriately caricatural, if as elusive as *moft*. Age, gender, profession, capability, class, wits, and wealth are inconsequential. Instead, Romanianness, inconsistency, fickleness, hypocrisy, presumptuousness, stupidity, opportunism and bombastic patriotism are essential traits. In line with the prejudices of the time, the female version – *moftangioaica* – is more vain. She is snobbish (she speaks Romanian only “avec les domestiques”), dishonest, promiscuous, greedy and ignorant, but like her male counterpart, she is above all nationalist.<sup>55</sup>

As the hilarious somersaults of the text suggest, *moftangiu* epitomizes the ills and vices of the nation. Above all, the text excoriates Romania’s obsession with politics and bogus patriots who, like Leonida, put on this role to hide deficiencies and lack of character. They come with a gamut of tics and tricks which are best represented in Caragiale’s theatre. *Moftangiu* truly comes to life in Caragiale’s comedies and their genial dialogues. Caragiale’s ridicule of bogus patriotism and political inanity finds its best expression in the speech of his protagonists. *O scrisoare pierdută* [A Lost Letter], Caragiale’s most popular political comedy, is an apposite illustration. Constructed around the interception of a compromising love letter, which is about to change the course of the elections in a provincial town, the play is populated almost exclusively by *moftangii*. The word itself features repeatedly in its different variants, either to dismiss something as insignificant, as a whim, or to indict somebody’s bad character as *moftangiu* or *moftolog* (this variant employs the Greek suffix “-olog” instead).

His portrait of a corrupt society generated some of the most memorable lines in Romanian literature. Nae Cațavencu, the representative of the radical-progressives, is blackmailing the leadership of the party in power (conservative presumably), on account of the love letter, in order to obtain their electoral support. At the constituency meeting he outlines his agenda: “First of all, history teaches us that a nation which does not advance, stagnates [...] and even regresses, that the law of progress is such that the faster one goes the

---

<sup>55</sup> “Moftangioaica”, *Moftul*, 5 (11 Feb. 1893), p. 1.

farther one gets.”<sup>56</sup> His opponent, Farfuridi, delivers his position on the revision of the constitution in a similarly absurd manner: “Please allow me, either one or the other: either to be revised, I agree! On condition that nothing changes; either not to be revised, I agree! But then it should be changed here and there, namely in its...essential...aspects.”<sup>57</sup> The two speeches are equally vacuous by way of redundancy and contradiction, two of Caragiale favourite stylistic strategies. The caricatural Romanians in *O Scrisoare Pierdută*, like in almost all his plays, are also plagued by verbal mannerisms, clichés, mispronunciations and deficient use of French neologisms.

## 5. Romanian Kitsch and the Absurd

Literary critic Ștefan Cazimir suggests that the *moft* portrayed in Caragiale’s theatre is a category congeneric with kitsch, and *moftangiu* a sort of kitsch-man: “Almost all the author’s oeuvre, including its journalistic part, is a vast study of the kitsch phenomenon, of its causes, forms and manifestations.”<sup>58</sup> Kitsch is a class-related phenomenon inextricably linked to the emergence of a literate but unsophisticated bourgeoisie, which benefited from leisure time and demanded to be entertained. In Romania, the conditions necessary for the development of a middle class occurred late in the nineteenth century, particularly during Brătianu’s rule (1876-1888) and exactly when Caragiale’s career picked up.<sup>59</sup> The Romanian bourgeoisie who animate Caragiale’s plays are all the more ridiculous due to their doubly sham character. Not only did they, in proper bourgeois fashion, tarnish all values in their

---

<sup>56</sup> Caragiale, *Opere Alese*, p. 228.

Or, mai intaiu si ‘ntaiu, istoria ne invata anume ca un popor care nu merge inainte sta pe loc [...], ba chiar da inapoi, ca legea progresului este asa, ca cu cat mergi mai iute, cu atat ajungi mai departe.

<sup>57</sup> Caragiale, *Opere Alese*, p. 225.

Din doua una, dati-mi voie: ori sa se revizuiasca, primesc! Dar sa nu se schimbe nimica; ori sa nu se revizuiasca, primesc! Dar atunci sa se schimbe pe ici pe colo, si anume in punctele...esentiale....

<sup>58</sup> Ștefan Cazimir, *I.L. Caragiale Față cu Kitsch-ul* [I.L. Caragiale Facing the Kitsch Culture] (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1988), p. 20.

Opera scriitorului, mai toata, nepierzand in vedere componenta ei publicistica, e un vast studiu dedicat fenomenului kitsch, cauzelor, formelor si manifestarilor ei.

<sup>59</sup> Cazimir, p. 34.



cupidity for possession and consumption, they were also poorer, less educated and more ignorant versions of the French counterparts they emulated. They were doubly kitsch: a kitsch copy of kitsch bourgeoisie.

The first issue of *Moftul Român* provides a good example of the phenomenon. Caragiale presents the urban landscape of Bucharest as a festive burlesque show occasioned by the paper's inauguration:

All decorative gimmicks, starting where they start and ending where they end, are of dubious taste. God! What forms, what colour combinations, what meanness of execution! What lack of artistic sense! If the genius of ugliness, of the baroque and of the monstrous presided over this work, he would have not managed better. The capital has the air of a parvenu ragamuffin who swims in ribbons, laces, frills, fake diamonds and painted feathers to go to a ball where she was only reluctantly invited.<sup>60</sup>

There is a lot of scorn in this castigation of kitsch extravaganza by way of which the municipality unsuccessfully tried to mask the shabbiness of the metropolis. The tautologies of the first sentence combine with the sarcastic description of decorative excess to give an absurdist dimension to the scene. In fact, the preparations are meant for the first visit of Princess Mary of Edinburgh, Prince Ferdinand's wife and Romania's Queen-to-be. Caragiale's indictment of Bucharest's gaudy demeanour was therefore spiced up by strong feelings of inferiority and shame. He was, in other words, assuming the gaze of the West taking in Romania's grotesque hybridity:

What will the young girl of proud Albion think, when she sees the famous *ad-hoc* railway station hall in the purest Peruvian style, when she drives at horse pace down the monumental Targoviștii street under the Bulgarian 'arcs du triomphe', and when she crosses, wonder of wonders, the pearl of the Oriental Paris, the immortal Mogoșoaia Bridge, with its shabby food shops, with its seedy pubs and crossroads – where the filth is stopped with the same success the magistrates are prevented from playing cards during office hours, and with the decorations of Pantelimonescu second class style. What a country of boors!<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> "Aparitia Noastra" [Our Appearance], *Moftul*, 1 (24 January 1893), 1-2 (pp. 1-2).

Toate bazaconiile decorative, incepand de unde incep si sfarsind unde se sfarsesc, sunt de un gust mai mult decat indoios. Dumnezeu! ce forme, ce imperecheri de culori, ce meschinarie de executie! ce lipsa de gust arstistic! Geniul uratului, al barocului si al monstruosului sa fi prezidat la o astfel de lucrare si nu reusea mai bine. Capitala are aerul unei mitocance parvenite, care se ineaca in panglici, horbote, volane, diamantice false, pene zugravite, ca sa mearga la un bal unde cei ce-au poftit-o n-au poftit-o decat de sila.

<sup>61</sup>"Aparitia", p. 2.

In a sample of the playwright's most effective jibe, Bucharest is a pathetic jumble of architectural features. The capital's architecture mirrors the social problems of the newly formed state, the clash between cultural paradigms. Bucharest is an improvised town, which flouting the stylistic and sanitation standards of civilized Europe to which it desperately wishes to belong. Its recent Oriental past stubbornly lingers in structures and habits that the modernizing ambitions of the state could not suppress. Kitsch, as Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu submitted, was "the most comical Romanian manifestation [...] the intractable, and implicitly ridiculous, antithesis between external appearance and internal core."<sup>62</sup>

The mismatch between form and content also afflicted the urban population, the active electorate of the new state. Caragiale's plays depict this dysfunctional society at odds with itself as an endless repetition of artificial poses, stereotypical attitudes and verbal clichés, Romania as newspaper. Cazimir attributes the symptoms satirized by Caragiale to the social dimensions of kitsch, thus echoing the destabilized universe in Ionesco's reading of Caragiale. By eliminating difference, which is a precondition for any real interaction and communication, the kitsch society collapses into absurd repetition, redundancy, shapelessness and meaninglessness:

The common denominator of all manifestations of kitsch is the tendency towards uniformity, or in a different term, the social entropy. [...] In the social sphere, entropy becomes synonymous with the uniformization of individuals, the obliteration of differences, collective mediocrity and banality [...] the definition of the kitsch-man is an inventory of absences: lack of personality, lack of shape, lack of consistency, lack of character. Receptivity to platitudes, feverish dissemination of clichés, cognitive paralysis developed in this vacuous space.<sup>63</sup>

---

Ce are sa gandeasca tanara copila a mandrului Albion, cand o vedea faimosul salon *ad-hoc* dela gara in stilul cel mai pur Peruvian, cand o trecea in pasul cailor prin monumentala ulita a Targovistii, pe sub arcurile de triumph in stil bulgaresc, si cand o parcurge minunea minunilor, perla Parisului Orientului, nemuritorul pod al Mogosoaii, cu bacanioarele lui, cu carciumioarele lui, cu rasantiile lui, - unde 'murdaria este oprita' cu acelasi success ca jocul de carti la magistrata - si cu decoratiile lui de stil Pantelimonescu clasa II? [...] Ce tara de mitocani!

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Cazimir, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Cazimir, p. 10.

Numitorul comun al tuturor infatisarilor kitsch-ului il reprezinta tendinta de uniformizare sau, cu alt termen, entropia sociala. [...] In sfera sociala, entropia devine sinonima cu uniformizarea indivizilor, stergerea deosebirilor, instalarea banalitatii si mediocritatii collective. [...] definitia omului-kitsch se construiește ca un inventar de absente: lipsa de personalitate, lipsa de relief, lipsa de consecventa, lipsa de caracter. Pe acest teren al

Cazimir's definition of kitsch introduces the themes and concerns of Ionesco's oeuvre, completing the multidirectional circle of references which connects Romanian modernity to the avant-garde. Caragiale's and Ionesco's protagonists inhabit the same vacuous imaginative space afflicted by inanity, cliché and epistemological crisis. In light of the illuminating encounter between the two writers, Mrs Smith's retort in *The Bald Soprano* appears to offer a reading key for the aesthetics of the absurd:

**Fire Chief:** A young calf had eaten too much ground glass. As a result, it was obliged to give birth. It brought forth a cow into the world. However, since the calf was male, the cow could not call him Mamma. Nor could she call him Papa, because the calf was too little. The calf was then obliged to get married and the registry office carried out all the details completely à la mode [...] You've heard that one?  
**Mrs. Smith:** It was in all the papers.<sup>64</sup>

That the Fire Chief's absurd story comes from the papers ties in with Caragiale's critique of modernity. The newspapers propagate the deterioration of language and thought.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite being based on the vaudeville form, Caragiale's theatre has a critical edge which belies its origins. *Junimea's* conservative elitist position Caragiale endorsed was paradoxically voiced by way of a popular form. As with Maiorescu's irreverent style and its emulation in *Sfrânciogul*, the forms of high and low culture interpenetrated in surprising ways. Deemed offensive and anti-patriotic after the first performances, Caragiale's plays subsequently entered the Romanian classical repertoire. Caragiale himself came to be considered one of the three masters of Romanian literature, alongside poet Mihai Eminescu and story-teller Ion Creangă. This was *Junimea's* artistic legacy. The Romanian playwright toyed with elements of the vaudeville and transformed it into the most effective critique of *fin-de-siècle* Romania in a visionary theatre which inspired Ionesco and still enthralled critics and audiences.

Stimulated by his journalistic career, the playwright also engaged ironically with various mass media forms – news, telegrams, reports, advertisements, caricature – and

---

vacuitatii se dezvoltă intens receptivitatea la locuri comune, colportarea asidua a clișeeilor, imobilismul cerebral.

<sup>64</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Four Plays*, p. 30.

incorporated them in his sketches and plays. Very much like the Dada movement, Caragiale used the resources of popular culture and mass media towards a wholesale critique of modernity. In Caragiale's oeuvre the ironic mode of social critique initiated by Alecsandri and Maiorescu (among others) mutated to more radical forms. The mushrooming of the press and the attendant encroachment of low culture, which in the context of Romania's political immaturity and social precariousness was all the more grotesque, precipitated this radicalization of forms. Although much abhorred, the new media and forms contaminated high culture to generate new sources of creativity and social commentary. The avant-garde sprang up in this fertile niche unlatched by Caragiale.

To conclude, Caragiale's forms call attention to the linguistic crisis prompted by the advent of mass media. They perform a critique of the politics embedded in journalistic rhetoric and practices, which has specifically local, as well as global implications. The playwright's pamphlets and mock-journals show how his critique operates formally towards an aesthetic of the absurd through redundancy and logical lapses. Ionesco's engagement with Caragiale in his reading, translation and production of the playwright's work bespeaks significant aesthetic affinities. Besides the continuities evoked by Caragiale's inclusion in *Spectacle Ionesco*, I take Ionesco's analysis of Caragiale's aesthetic as a wishful reading in that what he identifies as the critical purport of his predecessor's form is also what he takes over and develops in his own plays from a similar critical position.

#### Chapter 4. Avant-Dada: Tristan Tzara and the Romanian Modernist Left

The inscrutability of the Dada project, whose provocative mission is often subsumed to the extreme terribilism of early modernism, is compounded by Tzara's enigmatic artistic persona. But if the story of Tzara's life and his improbable journey from remote Bucharest to Zurich is gradually resurfacing in monographs and biographies, one is still at a loss grappling with his manifestos.<sup>1</sup> Oxymoronic at their very core as they advocate a rejection of politics by way of the very political form of the manifesto, the Dada manifestos puzzlingly combine absurd prose, foul language, anti-bourgeois provocations and catchy rhetoric. They also exhibit a budding penchant for left-wing jargon, in anticipation of Tzara's later communist conversion. Forays into Tristan Tzara's early Romanian work - neosymbolist poems published in various Romanian reviews and later collected as *Primele Poeme* [The First Poems] (1934) – have failed to clarify the Dadaist recalcitrance, its negative rhetoric and absurdity.<sup>2</sup> Literary critic Ovid Crohmălniceanu distinguishes two stages in Tzara's Romanian work: the poems published in the review *Simbolul* [The Symbol] (1912), which he concludes, are “frankly bad” neosymbolist pieces; and the more innovative pre-Dadaist poems published in 1915 in *Noua Revistă Română* [The New Romanian Review] and *Chemarea* [The Calling], of which “Înserează” would be included as “Soir” in the French volume “De Nos Oiseaux”.<sup>3</sup> Although indeed more experimental and perhaps feeding Tzara's later French oeuvre, even this second wave of Romanian poems does not announce the radicalism of the manifestos.

Tzara's unlikely transition from the neosymbolism of *Primele Poeme* to the radical iconoclasm of the Dadaist manifestos, and his conversion to communism during the Second World War, can be convincingly linked to his professional and personal contacts with the Romanian modernist left. Apart from explaining Tzara's radicalization, the contextual and intertextual reading I propose also calibrates the short-sighted lens of internationalist cosmopolitan approaches to Dada.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Marius Hentea, *TaTa Dada: The Real Life and Celestial Adventures of Tristan Tzara* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 2014); and Sandqvist,

<sup>2</sup> Ovid Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale* [Romanian Literature Between the Two World Wars], 2 vols (Bucharest: Universalia, 2003). Cernat, Hentea and Sandqvist offer close readings of Tzara's Romanian work.

<sup>3</sup> Ovid Crohmălniceanu, *Evreii in Mișcarea de Avangardă Românească* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2001), pp. 46-7.

Peter Bürger's authoritative analysis of the historical avant-gardes in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* relies entirely on a Western chronology whereby a relatively autonomous institution of art was in place by the end of the eighteenth century, followed a century later, by the complete social and political insulation of aestheticism which the avant-garde sought to reverse.<sup>4</sup> In this, he is overlooking any non-Western artistic histories and practices which, as in Tzara's case, might have had a bearing on avant-garde aesthetics. Contrary to Bürger's assumption, the radicalization of art in Romania's case was not a reaction to aestheticism's political impotence in which Symbolism is believed to have shared. Instead, a complex dynamic between political context and artistic expression encouraged the appropriation of symbolist form for political purposes.

The uncommon rapprochement between left-wing politics and Symbolism manifest in Tzara's editorial work at *Simbolul* (1912) and *Chemarea* (1915) pertains to the historical idiosyncrasies of the young Romanian state which engendered a "different" modernism resistant to modernist grand-narrative and theories. Romanian modernism, which Paul Cernat describes it as "weak, diluted, hybrid, eclectic" – has a different chronology and epistemology in fitting with its distinct experience of modernity.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is precisely the eclecticism of Romanian modernity and the antagonistic visions of the nation which prompted the revolutionary impetus of socialism to contaminate Symbolism, and the ensuing aesthetic radicalization.

As a young state, Romania's cultural priority was to consolidate the nation-state; it was less concerned with the autonomy of literature. Art was subordinated to the interests of the nation. Social problems related to the country's impoverished rural population and underdevelopment, and the political mission to reclaim Transylvania, were prescribed concerns for cultural and artistic endeavours. An immature national community and a precarious democracy meant that art could not fully enjoy the autonomy refuted by the avant-garde in Bürger's account. The reintegration of art into the praxis of life which, according to Bürger, defines the avant-garde, occurred because the political establishment felt threatened by an art detached from national concerns. The unusual concurrence of Symbolism and left-wing politics within Romania's eclectic modernism also challenges customary perceptions – Bürger's as well – of Symbolism's apolitical ethos.

---

<sup>4</sup> Bürger, pp. 17, 26-7.

<sup>5</sup> Cernat, p. 10.

I will first contextualize the aesthetic mutation at work in Romania's Symbolism. I will show that the intolerant cultural politics of the young Romanian state engendered both a different reception and an ideological repositioning of Symbolism. At the beginning of the century, the reactionary resistance to modernization and foreign forms was radicalized. The literati gathered around the nationalist review *Sămănătorul* (1901-1910) pushed *Junimea's* conservative agenda towards new xenophobic heights and denigrated Romanian symbolists on ethical and ethnic grounds. The symbolists and the socialists, thus, found themselves on the same side of the ideological divide against the nationalists. Moreover, the fact that many symbolists and socialists were of Jewish origin encouraged *Sămănătorul's* conflation of race and ideology and a closer rapprochement between modernism and left-wing politics.

I will then scrutinize the different incarnations of the socialist-symbolist alliance and their attendant projects. The Romanian socialist reviews, particularly *Facla* [The Beacon] and *Viața Socială* [Social Life], became increasingly receptive to modernist forms, advocating social change through aesthetic innovation, while also passing on their revolutionary ideas, burlesque critique and unorthodox editorial strategies to Tzara's reviews. Even though galvanized by an eager reception of Futurist experiments, news of which were quick to travel to Romanian enthusiasts, Tzara's radicalization and imprint on Dada aesthetics – absurdist manifestos, marketing pranks and scandal – was very much impressed by the aggressive satirical style of the left-wing press.<sup>6</sup> The Romanian modernist left, however, developed its polemical edge and radical aesthetics as a result of the heated exchanges with the nationalist groups which felt that both modernist literature and socialist ideas threatened traditional values.

The focus of this chapter is to retrace an intertextual history of the Dada manifesto in Romanian left-wing political pamphlets whose forms contaminated and radicalized Romanian Symbolism. Janet Lyon has shown that the manifesto is a cultural product of political modernity, enabled by the widespread circulation of polemical writing. The paradoxical nature of the manifesto – at once political and aesthetic, emotional and rational, violent and pacifist – reflects the political anxieties of modernism, equally attracted and repelled by democratic homogeneity and mass production.<sup>7</sup> In Romania, the polemical style which fed into Tzara's manifestos played up the utopian and oppositional tenets of left-wing ideology and the libertarian individualistic Symbolist culture against the repressive tendencies of xenophobic

---

<sup>6</sup> Marinetti's first manifesto was published by the Romanian review *Democrația* [Democracy] on 20 February 1909, the day of its appearance in *Le Figaro*. See Cernat, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), pp. 2, 5.

nationalism. As this constituted a heated debate over the shape and destiny of the nation, performativity was part of a belligerent arsenal, used to demolish opposition and procure support. Conversational concision, verve and irony were its best ingredients in terms of the responsiveness needed for effective debate, and of persuasiveness and readability.

### **1. Symbolism against the Nation**

On 25 October 1912 Tzara made a precocious appearance on the Romanian literary scene, under a pen name consonant with the literary review he launched together with a bunch of high-school mates. Only sixteen years old, S. Samyro became the sole editor of the brand new *Simbolul*, as its third number announced: “Mr. S. Samyro is *entirely* responsible for *all* editorial aspects of our review”.<sup>8</sup> Marius Hentea writes that, despite this emphasis on Tzara’s editorial role, his friends and fellow students, Ion Vinea and Marcel Iancu, must have helped a great deal with *Simbolul*’s production.<sup>9</sup> An obvious symbolist affair with an Art Nouveau cover, the review seemed to lack the iconoclastic edge which later became Tzara’s trademark. Apart from the editorial work, Tzara contributed four poems to *Simbolul*’s four issues: *Pe râul vieții* [On the river of life], *Cântec* [Song], *Poveste* [Story] and *Dans de Fee* [Fairy Dance], all of them with musical and rather decorative stanzas in the vein of Romanian symbolist poet Ion Minulescu.

More than fifty years after the publication of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, *Simbolul* was nothing if not outdated. Except that in young Romania, Symbolism was not yet old hat. Afflicted by literary anachronism and deterred by the nationalist demands on art, the Romanian literary scene was a long way from the French one in all sorts of ways. Transplanted to Romanian soil in the 1890s by the pedantic poet Alexandru Macedonski, who made a point of explaining the symbols in his poems to a Romanian audience unprepared for their obscurity, Symbolism was still a subversive aesthetic in 1912 Romania. The symbolist withdrawal from mimetic representation and the public sphere to a highly interiorized cosmopolitan poetics was at odds with Romania’s stringent social and political problems.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Simbolul*, 3 (1 Dec. 1912), p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Hentea, p. 36.





Figure 4: *Simbolul*, no. 1 (25 October 1912).

As a result of uneven development, the rift between the different temporalities, constituencies and visions of the nation, between the large rural population attached to a traditional organic ethos and the emerging urban bourgeoisie partial to the ways of Western modernity, widened. The lingering feudal social setup in rural areas led to conflicts between the land-owning elite and the dispossessed peasant population, and social unrest. Almost 10,000 peasants were killed during the violent riots of 1907 when the peasants took to the streets to fight for their rights, a calamity which, in Caragiale's view amounted to the bankruptcy of the national project.<sup>10</sup> Another important frustration which aggravated Romania's insecurities was Transylvania's disenfranchised Romanian population, under Austro-Hungarian control until 1918.

As these rifts and conflicts were challenging the precarious integrity of the nation, the beginning of the century witnessed a recrudescence of nationalism. For lack of practical solutions, the nationalists advocated artistic forms which would, they hoped, alleviate the problems and reunite the nation. Their belief that folklore and the rural ethos expressed the authentic spirit of the nation combined with a strong criticism of modernization and Western influence. The recharged appeal of nationalism in arts was, furthermore, a reaction to the excessive emulation of French modernism, very fashionable at the time in the café culture of Romanian towns.

The nationalist intellectuals grouped around the reviews *Sămănătorul* [The Sower] and *Neamul Românesc* [The Romanian People] advocated pastoral aesthetics and believed that Symbolism was a malignant import, shamefully self-indulgent and disconnected from the needs of Romania's impoverished rural population. If continuous with *Junimea's* concerns about the excessive emulation of French modernity, *Sămănătorism* (the movement took the review's name) was more intolerant and xenophobic. The critique of hasty modernization and cultural dependence was radicalized and extended to the aesthetic sphere. Maiorescu had only indicted the incongruous adoption of foreign cultural forms, while granting, at least in theory, the autonomy of the aesthetic. *Sămănătorul's* error of judgement, the literary critic Eugen Lovinescu thought, was to conflate culture with art and the ethic with the aesthetic, prioritizing moral and didactic content to the detriment of aesthetic value.<sup>11</sup> The neoromantic literature

---

<sup>10</sup> I. L. Caragiale, *Despre Lume, Artă și Neamul Românesc*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria Civilizației Române Moderne* [The History of Romanian Modern Civilization] (Bucharest: Editura Stiintifica, 1972). p. 310. Also by the same author, *Istoria*

*Sămănătorul* endorsed was critical of industrialization and urban culture while celebrating national history, nature and the rural ethos.

*Sămănătorul*'s doyen, the prominent historian and nationalist leader, Nicolae Iorga, contended that nationalism was the only legitimate aesthetic vision: "Literary movements? Besides the one from *Sămănătorul* [sic], I cannot acknowledge any as truly existent. The so-called symbolism? Has this nation become so stupid that it cannot laugh at the impudence of capsized minds or of cunning crooks?"<sup>12</sup> Symbolism was associated with a decadent middle-class and urban culture indifferent to the needs and concerns of the country. In Iorga's view, the nation was represented by Romania's 4.000.000 peasants. In view of the escalating social problems, critiques of Francophone modernism were becoming more aggressive.

It is true that emulation of Symbolist forms which was very much in vogue at the time, often resulted in bad poetry. Yet Iorga denounced modernist literature on political rather than aesthetic criteria. In the article "O Nouă Epocă de Cultură" [A New Era of Culture], he argued:

In Romania, we have a state for all and a culture for the boyars and the parvenu in political jobs. We have a national state without a national culture, but with a foreign, French ersatz culture instead. We have the dream of national union in the same political entity, we are wasting it in words but not accomplishing it in deeds: the borders are still borders in our culture. We want to be united in one place but we don't know each other. We need a culture for everybody, from the top to the bottom, from one end of Romanian land to the other, a culture to be ours, books on whose inspired lines to drop both the tear of the high, rich lady and of the peasant wife, books taken from eager hands all through the land where our language is spoken.<sup>13</sup>

---

*Literaturii Române Contemporane II. Evoluția Criticei Literare* [The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature II. The Evolution of Literary Criticism] (Bucharest: Ancora, 1926), pp. 5-27.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in D. Murărașu, *Istoria Literaturii Române* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1946), p. 298.

Curentele literare? In afara de curentul de la *Sămănătorul*, nu pot recunoaște niciunul ca în adevăr existent. Asazișul simbolism? S-a prostit nația aceasta într'atât încât nu mai poate rade de desantarile minților pe dos sau ale dibacilor sarlatani.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Murărașu, p. 297.

Avem în România un stat pentru toți și o cultură pentru boierii și parvenții din funcții. Avem un stat național fără o cultură națională, ci o spoială străină, franceză. Avem visul de uniune națională în aceeași formă politică, îl leganam în vorbe și nu-l chemăm la noi prin fapte: hotarele mai sunt încă hotare pentru cultura noastră. Ne dorim uniți la un loc și nu ne cunoaștem nicidecum... Ni trebuie cultura tuturor, de sus până jos, dintr'un hotar al Romanității până la altul, o cultură care să fie a noastră, cărți pe rândurile inspirate ale cărora să cada deopotrivă lacrima înaltei, bogatei doamne și a satencii, cărți smulse din mâini nerabdătoare până unde rasuna graiul acestui neam.

Behind this utopian vision of an art form, which would reunite the divided constituencies of the nation, there was an important political stake. Iorga's criticism was biased by his right-wing views antagonistic the new urban middle-class, a large proportion of which was of Jewish extraction. Accordingly, he blamed the Jewish intelligentsia for all the evils of Romanian society. Iorga's paranoid xenophobia conveniently conflated anti-Semitism, class-antagonisms and a reactionary distaste for French influences in the critique of Symbolism. That *Sămănătorul's* neoromantic literature was neither indigenous, nor accessible, or attuned to the needs of illiterate peasants they sought to idealize, did not seem to matter much. It was essential that art should be nationalist in both its aesthetic and its concerns.

The symbolists' disregard for the problems of the nation and their decadence were violently indicted as in this diatribe, one of many Iorga that wrote during his prolific career:

Down with the wicked foreign babble from cosmopolitan salons, for whose maintenance blood is sweated on the callously worked furrows, down with booklets of falsified feelings and corruption with which the West poisons ignorant countries, down with the lawless aping (mimicry).<sup>14</sup>

This was no less than a war, if only a metaphoric one, complete with the requisite imagery of aggression (poisoning) and physical sacrifice (blood), between traditionalism and modernism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Iorga's indictment shows how subversive Symbolism was felt to be to the Romanian national cause.

The deeply personal mode of Symbolism thus acquired political relevance in Romania and inadvertently became an important concern in national politics. As a consequence, the very function of modernist art was paradoxically transformed. In her perceptive analysis of Hungarian aestheticism, which experienced a similar repudiation by the nationalist establishment, Mary Gluck argues that "modernism as a cultural gesture was repoliticized, and the modernists were reintegrated into the political life of the nation they had hoped to transform".<sup>15</sup> Or this is exactly where, according to Peter Bürger, the difference stands between modernism more generally and the avant-gardes, in the latter's insistence that art be reintegrated

---

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Murărașu, p. 297.

Jos nemernica baguiala straina din saloanele cosmopolite, pentru intretinerea carora curg sudori de sange pe lanurile muncite din greu, jos cartuliile de simtire falsificata si de coruptie cu care Apusul otraveste tari nepricepute, jos maimutaria nelegiuita.

<sup>15</sup> Gluck, p. 160.

into the praxis of life, have real consequences, trigger political change. Tzara's change of face, the radical aesthetic mutation in his oeuvre, I argue, had to do with the historical peculiarities of that insecure and deeply conservative part of Romania, which could not digest Symbolism's new zeitgeist and forms. In response to the disproportionate resistance and encroachment, the second-generation Romanian symbolists, including Tzara and his friends, sharpened the political edge of their aesthetics. By way of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the nationalist rebuff pushed Symbolism outside the literary law, which is to say towards the insurgent avant-garde. The Romanian symbolists learned a compelling, if unwarranted, lesson about the revolutionary potential of form.

## 2. Modernist Aesthetics, Left-Wing Politics

In Romania's case, there was more to the politicization of Symbolism than just traditionalist resistance. For some time, in that abstruse and strangely permissive cultural mood of turn-of-the-century Romania, symbolists were toying with socialist ideas and socialists were hailing symbolist literature.<sup>16</sup> Ideological and artistic radicalism – what Cernat called the “synthetic newism of Romanian symbolism” – joined hands in an, if only conjectural, alliance between socialism and symbolism.<sup>17</sup> The specific historical set-up of turn of the century Bucharest brought together Marxism and the disinterested and individualistic aesthetics of Symbolism by way of their cultural novelty and the common rejection of bourgeois values, even though from different class positions. This was a conjectural rapprochement perhaps also galvanized by their common modernist stance opposed to the nationalists' reactionarism, but not necessarily a propaganda strategy on the socialists' part, as *Sămănătorul*'s Ilarie Chendi claimed.<sup>18</sup> The fact

---

<sup>16</sup> The ideological open-mindedness of the Romanian symbolists was part of that modernist zeitgeist which Cernat termed “the synthetic newism of Romanian symbolism”. See Cernat, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Cernat, p.12.

<sup>18</sup> Ilarie Chendi, “Viața Literară in 1911”, *Luceafărul*, 3 (1912), 61-65 (p. 63).

Mr Cocea wanted to succeed and he recruited our decadent symbolist youth, who, not having anything to do with the socialist doctrine, did not manage to prevent the inexplicable decline of the review.

DI. Cocea voia sa razbiasca si a recurs la tinerii nostrii decadenti si simbolisti din Bucuresti, cari neavand insa nimic cu doctrinele socialismului, n-au putut face serviciul ce i se cuvinea revistei, ca sa nu apuna in mod inexplicabil.

that both socialists and symbolists were the ideological enemies of *Sămănătorul* simply made their alliance more feasible.

The rapprochement between Symbolism and left-wing politics was precipitated by the blood-soaked peasant riots of 1907 and by the rift in the Romanian Social Democratic Workers' Party (PSDMR). In 1899, a socialist faction defected to the Liberal Party in what came to be named "the generous betrayal", causing the decline of the socialists' organ *Contemporanul* [The Contemporary].<sup>19</sup> Among the defectors were its previous leaders Ion Nădejde and Constantin Mille who concluded that Marxist solutions could not be applied to a predominantly agrarian state like Romania.<sup>20</sup> The considerably weaker socialist community tried to reassemble its supporters around a number of socio-literary publications like *România Muncitoare* [Working Romania], *Viitorul Social* [The Social Future] and *Pagini Libere* [Free Pages]. Particularly significant are the unlikely collusion of disaffected left-wing intellectuals with symbolist poets, and the advent of a leftist modernist aesthetic which promoted social emancipation through artistic innovation.

An instance of this phenomenon, where socialist realist texts shared editorial space with symbolist poems, was *Linia Dreaptă* [The Right Line], published in 1904 by socialist journalist N.D. Cocea and symbolist poet Tudor Arghezi. Paul Cernat writes that *Linia Dreaptă* was:

A bizarre coupling between Macedonski's young enthusiasts from *Liga Ortodoxă* [The Orthodox League] and the "intellectual proletariat" of socialist orientation, being at the same time, the embryo from which *Viața Socială* lead by Arghezi and N.D. Cocea, will be born a few years later.<sup>21</sup>

A nodal point, hence, between symbolism and left-wing politics, and an important precedent for the more revolutionary and aesthetically adventurous *Viața Socială* and *Facla*, which, in their turn propelled *Simbolul* and *Chemarea*. Arghezi and Cocea were friends from high school and young admirers of Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea (the ideologue of PSDMR), whose Marxist convictions were at the time at odds with Maiorescu's disinterested aesthetics. But they were

---

<sup>19</sup> Cernat, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Henri H. Stahl, *Gânditori și Curente de Istorie Socială Românească* [Thinkers and Movements of Romanian Social History] (Bucharest: Bucharest UP, 2001), p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Cernat, pp. 29-30.

Desprinsa din trunchiul *Literatorului*, nu mai puțin efemera *Linia Dreaptă* a lui T. Arghezi, Gala Galaction, N.D. Cocea și V. Demetrius (1904) este un cuplaj insolit între tinerii macedonskieni de la *Liga Ortodoxă* și "proletariatul intelectual" de orientare socialistă, constituind totodată, embrionul din care se va naște peste cativa ani, *Viața Socială* (1910) condusa de Arghezi și N.D.Cocea.

also drawn to Alexandru Macedonski's eccentric symbolism.<sup>22</sup> *Linia Dreaptă* was therefore a friendly enterprise which conflated its editors' political and aesthetic interests.

Due to the semantic particularities of the Romanian word "drept" [straight, but also right], *Linia Dreaptă*'s title points both to continuity and consistency, as in a straight line, and to ethical legitimacy, as in the right line to take. Its agenda, if not overtly left-wing, had definite political leanings and promoted an iconoclastic art committed to social amelioration:

Our review's nickname summarizes for us, our spiritual toil not to err either by thought or by pen. [...] Maybe "the right line" means something more; maybe its head is only the convergent point of two ramifications coming from way back – and how long we still have to go to reach it! Maybe with time, it will come to deserve its name. [...]

We understand art, in its universal and heterogeneous acceptance, to be dwelling in the superior realm. From up there down to us, those preoccupied in a more relative and brutal climate, there are enough layers of convention to mangle our pen, like cotton wool. This cotton wool, which from far away seems to be bounty-filled clouds, if eaten in large quantities and rolled in sugar – portions - ; made us aspire to its total ignition. It is an ideal for life; patience and determination are with us. Why such a bright horizon should be spoiled?

"The right line"... will appear until one day, and maybe it will disappear before its time, be it as it may! Though we, the friends grouped in the editorial board, reunited, each of us coming forward from our hiding place with warm hearts and eyes raised to the ideal, will endure.<sup>23</sup>

By advocating the repudiation of literary conventions which stood in the way of pure art, the article set an iconoclastic precedent for the Romanian avant-garde.<sup>24</sup> The conventions

---

<sup>22</sup> Tudor Vianu, *Scritori Români* [Romanian Writers] (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971), 3 vols, III, pp. 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> *Linia Dreaptă*, 1 (15 April 1904), p. 2.

Porecla revistei noastre rezuma pentru noi, truda de noastra sufleteasca de a calca pe cat se pote mai putin stramb cu ideea si cu condeiul [...] Pote ca <<linia dreapta>> inseamna ceva mai mult; pote ca varful ei se ramifica dublu innapoi – si cat avem pan'acolo! – pote ca 'si va indreptati cu vremea, numele. [...] Noi dam Artei in conceptiune universala si multipla, zona superioara; dar de la ea pana la noi, cesti preocupati intr-o clima mai relative si brutala se stratifica destule conventiuni cari sa ne incurce condeiul, ca un bumbac. Acest bumbac ce pare din departare nori incarcati cu belsug, mancat in cantitati surprinzatoare, tavalit in zahar – portii –; ne-a lasat loc sa nazuim la aprinderea lui totala. E un ideal pentru toata viata; rabdarea si hotararea sunt cu noi. Pentru-ce orizontul atat de senin, sa fie spurcat ci nu senin?

<<Linia dreapta>> ....o sa apara pana intr-o di, si pote ca mai 'nainte de vremea calculate se va stinge, fie! ramanem inasa, prietenii grupati in directiunea ei, re-intalniti; fie-care venind din ascunzatoare lui cu inima tot calda si cu privirile tot catre ideal inalitate.

<sup>24</sup> Its post-symbolist sequel, *Revista Celorlalți*, similarly instigated their readers to "Light the torches" in its manifesto.

*Linia Dreaptă*'s editors wished to wipe out were *Sămănătorul*'s antiquated nationalist aesthetic. Tudor Arghezi, whose lyrics featured prominently in *Linia Dreaptă*, challenged *Sămănătorul*'s ossified formulas in terms of both form and language. Drawing on Baudelaire, he integrated elements of Symbolist aesthetics to the local poetic canon and opened up lyrical expression to registers previously considered unpoetic.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, the poet achieved a surprising originality most of his contemporaries, strongly attached to French models, lacked. Despite his obvious merits – Arghezi subsequently came to be recognized as one of Romania's foremost poets – *Sămănătorul*'s anti-modernist critique strongly contested his work.

It is against this context of contemporary cultural and aesthetic debates, that *Linia Dreaptă*'s rather vague profession of faith can be effectively read. The article was written with a nod to particular problems and specific people, and intervened in the on-going dispute between modernism and tradition, between progressive and reactionary politics. Surprisingly, there is no direct mention of political issues or symbolist aesthetics. The double-ended line of the review, however, could well be a hint to the union of Symbolism and left-wing ideology as their distinctive mark. Yet the sentence's movement backwards and forwards in time mixes up completely the temporal coordinates of the project. The origin of the review, the presumed meeting of two lines or tendencies, all of a sudden turns into a target to be achieved, which could be a very smart way of talking about the spontaneous and as yet undefined concatenation of symbolism and Marxism, if it was not just confused phrasing.

The obscure articulation could also reflect the lack of a coherent conceptual framework for this unlikely association. Since this alliance against nationalist parochialism was more instinctive and conjectural than theoretical or programmatic, the manifesto signed collectively invokes the friendship between the editors instead of explaining the rapprochement between symbolism and socialism. The editorial, modernistically entitled "A, B, C...", is self-consciously modest in its ambitions because it both wanted to distance itself from the overambitious and disingenuous pledges prevalent at the time, particularly in nationalist publications, and it was aware of the vagaries of small publications.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, by featuring Arghezi's symbolist lyrics and social realist pieces side by side, the contributions reflect the editors' eclectic interests.

---

<sup>25</sup> Nicolae Davidescu, *Aspecte si Direcții Literare* (Craiova: Aius, 2010), p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> It ceased publication after only five issues.



Arghezi and Cocea later collaborated at *Viața Socială* [Social Life] (1910), which openly promoted the socialist cause in news features, educational articles and symbolist lyrics. Among its contributors, Ion Minulescu, V. Demetrius and N. Davidescu later joined young Tzara's group. Celebrating the review's first anniversary, Cocea's December 1910 editorial stressed the importance of Arghezi's poetry for the socialist cause:

Persuaded that in the field of arts and literature, only the art and phrases which elate the human mind and soul, is – regardless of school and tendencies – the only revolutionary force, we attempted a free collaboration between art and socialism and we liked the thought of putting our social ideal, in the first and last number of our review, under the auspices of our times' most revolutionary poet: Tudor Arghezi.<sup>27</sup>

Arghezi's poem *Rugă de Seară* [Evening Prayer] had appeared in the first number of *Viața Socială*, in lieu of a manifesto. On the occasion of the anniversary, Cocea's address was complemented by the same poet's *Drum în Iarnă* [Winter Road] alongside a drawing by Iosif Iser – Marcel Iancu's post-impressionist teacher (see Figure 5). *Rugă de Seară*, which had stood in for the review's manifesto, has an ambitiously messianic mission of social and political reform: "Oh, grant me the strength to sink,/ A dim and slumbering world,/ So that another, light and gentle, /Can spring forth from the depths".<sup>28</sup> Conversely, *Drum în Iarnă* does not in any way transgress the ambit of a winter poem of symbolist notation. Cocea was hoping that Arghezi's symbolist forms, apart from effecting a liberation of Romanian poetics, would encourage a deeper awareness of social problems and create structures of feeling propitious for political change. This recruitment of symbolist poetry for socialist purposes represented a significant step from aestheticism towards politically conscious forms.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> N. D. Cocea, "Către Cititori" [To the Readers], *Viața Socială*, 11-12 (Decembrie 1910), 266-67 (p. 266).

<sup>28</sup> Tudor Arghezi, *Rugă de Seară* [Evening Prayer], *Viața Socială*, 1 (February 1910), p.1.

My approximate translation: "O, dă-mi puterea să scufund/ O lume vagă, lăncezândă,/ Și să țâșnească apoi, din fund,/ O alta limpede și blândă."

<sup>29</sup> Cocea and Arghezi collaborated on several editorial projects, *Linia Dreaptă*, *Viața Socială* and *Facla*, among others, giving the Romanian left-wing press its characteristic incisiveness.

mai preses de toate — peatrucă în lupta vieții e firesc să nu se fie seamă de marea înviată și de jertfite zadarnice — de opera pe care am îndeplinit-o.

După un an de existență putem, fără prezanție deșartă și fără falșă modestie, să privim cu mândrie pentru trecut și cu încredere în viitor, opera noastră.

Pe tărâmul literar, nu ne-am mulțumit ca atâtea alte reviste să facem apel la numele cunoscute și să vegetăm în umbra talentelor manifestate alurea. Pentru aceasta ajung editorii. Noi am crezut că menirea unei reviste e să recunoască talentele noi, să le dea prijejul să se afirmă și să le impună atenției contemporanilor. Dacă *Viața Socială* va însemna ceva în viitor în istoria literaturii noastre e peatrucă intrinsecă au scris cele d'întîi pagine: Tudor Arghezi, G. Galatișan, F. Dumăbrău, N. Porumbău și alții alții, fără să mai vorbim de studiile lui *Treian Văit*, *Toma Ibragim*, *Daniel Padua*, G. Bocu, etc.

Pe tărâmul social și politic *Viața Socială* a înțeles să păstreze aceeași noadă de independență față de forțele reacționare, și de luptă față de curentele potrivnice progresului și liberei cercetări. Fără să spargie nici unui partid politic *Viața Socială* a luptat și va lupta pentru marea ideal de emancipare și de cultură al socializării.

Convinsi că pe terezul social singură concepția socialistă e în stare să strunească prejudecățile trecutului și să asigure progresul omenei prin forța ei revoluționară:

Convinsi că pe terezul artelor și-al literaturii, numai arta și brava care înalță sufletul și gândirea omenească, reprezintă — independent de școală și de tendinși — singura forță revoluționară, am încercat o colaborare liberă între artă și socializm și ne-a plăcut gândul să punem idealul nostru social, în primul și în ultimul număr al revistei, sub auspiciile poetului celei mai revoluționare ai vremii noastre: Tudor Arghezi.

V. S.

## Drum în iarnă

Decembrie, ca un paradis  
de marmur și scietei  
blăniță și-a deschis,  
și dintre bei  
un vaet lin de clopoței  
suspina-abia, ca'n vis.

De-asupra nopților s'a nîms  
legendă ideală,

și nu e suflet ne-atinș  
— or-elt de stins —  
de diafana ei petală,  
în care să nu fi descîns  
lumina siderală.

E fecerie de argint  
cristalizat în pățuri lungi,  
și pe elt ochii și-i alungi,  
pe elt ajuugi,  
e marmur alb, neprihănit,  
pustiă și necărușit.

— Feți dulci, o clipă îndrăgostiți,  
pe-acta farmec și senin,  
fiți cel puțin  
voi, fericiți.

TUDOR ARGHEZI



În umbra lămpilor cernite  
se varsă vis în cupe noi  
și capetele mult iubite  
se 'nvecinase pe necămite  
ca niște frunze de trifoi.

In promoting Arghezi's poetry, Cocea was very judicious not only about the poet's talent, but also, following in Wagner's footsteps, about the revolutionary potential of artistic form. He anticipated the later more famous alliances between left-wing politics and innovative form as, for example, in the Soviets' promotion of Russian Futurism and Constructivism, and German Dada's alignment with the Spartacus Communist Group in 1918. In Romania's case, though, the anachronistic circulation of aesthetic and political ideas resulted in a surprising ideological recycling of Symbolism.

Whereas Arghezi started applying his talents to political lampoons as well as symbolist poetry, Cocea continued promoting the rapprochement between aesthetic innovation and progressive politics with surprising foresight.<sup>30</sup> If the former's poetry, notwithstanding its originality and political commitment, was worlds away from what we now understand by avant-garde, the latter's serial editorial column "Spre arta viitoare" [Towards Future Art] set out the theoretical coordinates of Dada aesthetics *avant la lettre*, as a socialist form of art, open to all and attuned to social issues:

And while the environment created by the contemporary mentality forces the intelligentsia and the artists to restrict their creative faculties to a sterile art, meant only for the satisfaction of a handful of the privileged, here and there, in this steppe charred by a lack of life, ardour and ideals, one can feel the vibrations of the compact masses, which coming to life so late, demand in their turn the noble satisfaction afforded by literature and art. Here and there, through the thick felt of these sad times, one can glimpse the dawns of the future art, as when on the vast shimmer of swamps poisoned by malaria, summer water lilies force their way through. [...] Instead of the subtle, anaemic and musical poetry addressed to the sensibilities refined to madness of a class tired of inactivity; instead of the poetry written to please the bored minorities [...] there will be an expansive poetry, encompassing all human worries [...], which will strengthen life rather than putting it to sleep.<sup>31</sup>

The scandalous performances and syntactic mutiny of Dada might not have been what Cocea had in mind when he described "the art of the future". But Dada was not art for the fragile sensibilities of a privileged and apathetic class. Its scandalous performances and subversive aesthetic blew up the divides between high and popular culture, advocated a more inclusive idea of art, garrulous and streetwise, and shook the bourgeoisie out of their comforts and class-prejudices. Just as the "future art" was to erupt, in Cocea's utopian vision, in the guise

---

<sup>30</sup> After *Viața Socială*, Cocea edited *Rampa* [The Ramp] and *Facla*.

<sup>31</sup> N.D. Cocea, "Spre Arta Viitoare" [Towards Future Arts], *Pagini Libere* [Free Pages], I (6), 3 August 1908, p. 85; I (9), 24 August 1908, p 136. *Pagini Libere* was another left-wing publication aesthetically consonant with *Simbolul*.

of a socially progressive water lily from the decadent swamp, the Romanian avant-garde emerged from the ruins of Symbolism.

Theoretically, this critique of art's impotence and complicity with bourgeois ideology reformulates ad litteram the political relevance and the sui generis demarcation of the historical avant-gardes as defined by Peter Bürger. In other words, Cocea came up unwittingly with an anticipatory theory of the avant-garde as an attack on the institution of art, before the object of the theory, at least its Dada incarnation, properly came into being. At work in this coincidence, was not so much Cocea's prescience, as Tzara's acumen in capitalizing on left-wing cultural critique when he joined Cabaret Voltaire. Yet Cocea, a fervent supporter of Arghezi's poetry and an editor accommodating of symbolist forms, cannot have had in mind Symbolism as such, when he denounced decadent art. When compared with his editorial on Arghezi, Cocea's castigation appears to have in view the "bad" decorative Symbolism, as practiced by many uninspired imitators of French forms. In practice, though, he abhorred more the committed pastoral aesthetics of *Sămănătorul* than the bad Symbolism of middling poets. As with Bürger's theory, Cocea's aesthetic critique of Marxist inspiration did not quite fit the complexities of Romanian cultural politics.

### **3. "Protopopii Familiei Mele" [The Bishops in my Family], Symbolism + Socialism = DADA**

*Simbolul* was the progeny of the unusual collusion of Marxism and symbolist individualistic aesthetics brought together by the specific historical context of turn-of-the-century Romania. Invigorated by the socialist spell and also inspired by the sensational advent of Futurism, some symbolist groups became more aggressive in their quest for originality, advocating a violent break with tradition, as in *Revista Celorlalți*'s [The Others' Review] (1908) manifesto "Aprindeți torțele" [Light the Torches] or in *Insula*'s [The Island] (1912) programmatic articles.<sup>32</sup> Many contributors to *Revista Celorlalți* and *Insula* later migrated to *Simbolul*.<sup>33</sup> Romanian modernism was a very small world indeed.

Despite its predominantly decadent output, *Simbolul* departs significantly from its symbolist predecessors. Among languorous prose and voluptuous lyrics, political satire

---

<sup>32</sup> Cernat, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Among them Emil Isac, Șerban Bascovici, N. Davidescu, Theodor Solacolu, Claudia Millian, Adrian Maniu, Eugen Speranția, and Al. Vițianu.

disrupted the sedate atmosphere of high-street Symbolism. *Simbolul* opened its first number with a lampoon by Emil Isac, targeting Nicolae Iorga and taking sides with the socialist-anarchist review *Facla*.<sup>34</sup> In “Protopopii Familiei Mele” Isac writes:

It’s a known thing that in my family there are more bishops than reasonable phrases in one of Mr. Iorga’s articles. I am the son of a good family, my parents were very rich two hundred years ago – I have rich aunties and bishops, bishops, bishops. The first one is an old bishop. [...] The second bishop is younger. He has five merry children, full of Transylvanian blood and good qualities, like for example that of pouring sand in hats and hanging intestines on nails. This bishop plays the flute admirably, and eats and drinks wonderfully.<sup>35</sup>

There couldn’t be a more apposite precedent for Dada manifestos. All the elements are there: the prank, the scandal, the hilarious logical lapses, the truisms, the juicy nonsense. One recognizes here echoes of the softer, less politically charged, inconsequentiality of Tzara’s prose, like in this passage of “Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love”: “I prefer the poet who is a fart in a steam engine – he is gentle but weep not – he is polite and semi-pederast, and swims.” (*Seven* 33) Both Isac, in the last sentence of the extract, and Tzara rely on depleted syntax to frustrate the logic and epistemological hierarchy of descriptive conventions. Isac’s bishop, like Tzara’s poet, is a character sabotaged by linguistic tricks, by nonsense. Even though Tzara’s rhetoric is more straightforwardly offensive, Isac’s absurdist pamphlet airs all the Dadaist barbs against bourgeois values and sensibilities: religion, family, reason, and sexual prudishness.

The presence of Isac’s subversive political satire in the pages of a symbolist review can only be explained in terms of the political allegiances and cultural debates which divided the Romanian public sphere at the time. What makes it even more subversive is the personal nature of the attack. Iorga and the Sămănătorist aesthetics, as illustrated by one of its most important exponents, the poet Octavian Goga, are openly reprimanded. Alluding to the reasons for the enmity between him and Iorga, Isac impugns the intolerance and antiquarianism of the Sămănătorists in a text that anticipates the anti-bourgeois provocations typical of the Dada manifestos:

The third bishop in my family is absolutely young. He is about 70 years old and has a twenty-eight year old wife – he subscribes to *Luceafărul* and loves Goga. [...] I have many more relatives, manor lords, barons, hysterical women and honourable matrons

---

<sup>34</sup> For an analysis of *Facla*’s political orientation see G. Pienescu, “Corvoada Gingasa”, *Viața Românească*, 49 (2012), <[http://www.viataromaneasca.eu/arhiva/78\\_via-a-romaneasca-5-6-2012/49\\_note-din-launtru/1181\\_corvoada-ginga-a-v.html](http://www.viataromaneasca.eu/arhiva/78_via-a-romaneasca-5-6-2012/49_note-din-launtru/1181_corvoada-ginga-a-v.html)> [accessed 19 April 2014].

<sup>35</sup> Emil Isac, “Protopopii Familiei Mele”, *Simbolul*, 1 (25 Oct. 1912), p. 2.

who carry their laziness in coaches – but these relatives don't honour me. They don't seem to like me because I am not a mummy and I don't reek of tomb, I don't write odes to Iorga and I don't write anecdotes about Grandpa Toader.<sup>36</sup>

For lack of a manifesto or profession of faith, Isac's article straightaway enmeshed the new organ in the ideological dispute between *Facla* and Iorga's new organ, *Neamul Românesc* [The Romanian People].<sup>37</sup> Since Isac had contributed to *Facla* before then, it was only natural that he continued the long-winded and ruthless exchange with Iorga and his nationalist group in *Simbolul*. Nicolae Iorga, the flag-bearer of Romanian ethnic nationalism and an ardent believer in the ethical mission of art, would not tolerate Isac's attachment to Symbolism and socialism.<sup>38</sup>

Iorga's reactionary agenda and anti-Semitism reflected larger social and political issues, and anti-Semitic state policies. Since the Jewish community was mainly entrepreneurial urban middle class, among a majority peasant Romanian population, the public perception encouraged by the likes of Iorga was that a foreign middle class was exploiting the already destitute Romanian peasants. In line with other nationalist demagogues, Iorga blamed the Jewish intelligentsia for all the evils of modernity. Anti-Semitism was unfortunately part and parcel of the conflict between nationalists and modernists, all the more so as the Jewish intelligentsia tended to be cosmopolitan, fashionable and abreast of the latest artistic developments. Malignant in intent, quite accurate in effect, Iorga's description of the socialist youth underscores their iconoclastic style:

Who doesn't know the den of offenses, calumnies, insinuations, indecencies and provocations of national feelings and moral decency, undermining the foundations on which every society needs to be supported, the den where Mr. Mille with a number of assimilated and unassimilated Jews, is joined by the rich, chic, elegant, riotous, garrulous, irresponsible, the newest socialist youth?<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Isac, "Protopopii", p. 2.

Al treilea protopop al familiei mele, este absolut tanar. E de vreo saptezeci de ani si are nevasta de douazeci si opt – aboneaza "Lucafarul" si iubeste pe Goga. [...] Mai am multe neamuri. Castelani, baroni, avocati, medici, femei isterice si matroane onorabile, care-si poarta lenea in trasuri – dar neamurile acestea nu-mi fac cinste. Ele par a nu ma iubi, de oarece nu sunt mumie si nu miros a mormant, nu scriu ode lui Iorga si nu scriu anecdote despre pipa lui mos Toader.

<sup>37</sup> By this time Iorga had fallen out with *Sămănătorul*'s editorial group and *Neamul Românesc* proceeded to voice the Sămănătorist ideology. See Murărașu, p. 208-09.

<sup>38</sup> To this day, his efforts to promote national specificity are still part of a Romanian cultural mythology which conveniently overlooks his racist views.

<sup>39</sup> Nicolae Iorga, "Două procese" [Two Trials], *Neamul Românesc*, 85-86 (3 August 1912), p. 1345-46.

These dapper, bright, talented and subversive youngsters, gathered around the socialist leader Constantin Mille, were Tzara's Romanian mates and Isac was one of them. One can easily recognize in Iorga's sketch, the profile of the future Dadaist Tzara, set on both charming and scandalizing Europe, dandy and rogue all at once.

The editorial war between *Facla* and Iorga's *Neamul Românesc* had all the sensationalist accessories of a Dada scuffle. Its main protagonists, Iorga, Cocea and Arghezi, were famous for their knack for polemics and satire. This incredibly productive debate generated gripping contributions and made up a great part of both *Facla*'s and *Neamul Românesc*'s 1912 output. In July 1912, *Facla* featured a cartoon of a bed bug on its cover page and a pamphlet by Cocea targeting King Carol I. "Her call is to feed on our blood" is the catchphrase opening of the pamphlet:

After forty-five years of reign by King Carol, we are today the country of syphilis, of pellagra, of chronic riots and permanent hunger. We are the people who had their ideals castrated and the wings of their fervour broken. We are the bed sheets which Brătianu's and Take's bedbugs infected and swarm. We are the country of King Carol I. Don't turn, don't move, above all, don't dream, so that you don't crush by mistake, the bed bug which feeds underneath you.<sup>40</sup>

Cocea's pamphlet was a scathing attack on the Romanian political establishment. Ion C. Brătianu and Take Ionescu, mentioned in the pamphlet, were the leaders of the two main political parties, liberal and conservative, respectively, which had taken turns in leading the Romanian government during Carol's reign. The text has the directness, eloquence and appeal of a manifesto. The short, repetitive structures, and the plain and straightforward style give it an efficient and persuasive modernist edge. Yet Cocea is at his most convincing when at his most poetic. He invokes that most precious of human luxuries – dreaming – which allows one to rise above the economic indignities of the flesh. His socialist critique is dressed up in a sentimental rhetoric bound to impress a readership unwilling to surrender their understanding of themselves as primarily spiritual. Cocea's critique overplays its effects with such rhetoric virtuosity that his

---

Tovarasia socialist-iudaica, unita prin vanitate si lacomie, dispune de mai multe foi, care se fac a nu sti una de alta, dar lucreaza sistematic si solidar, dupa socoteli istete. <<Dimineata>> da numai stiri intr'ales; <<Adivor>> judeca politica Romanilor din Romania si din celelalte provincii, strecurand sistematic lingusirea favoritelor sai, care sunt si dusmanii natiunii noastre, si clevetirea dusmanilor sai, cari s'au deosebit fata de Israelul zionist si socialist; <<Rampa>> face literatura de panorama, cu sticle colorate, oglinzi cu multe fete, darabane si felurite figuri de ceara, iar <<Facla>> unge cu murdarii de pe strada, depositate in buzunarele renegatilor si raspopilor sai, usile oamenilor cum se cade.

<sup>40</sup> N.D., Cocea, *Pamflete Antidinastice* [Anti-dynastic Pamphlets] (Bucharest: Editura de Stat, 1949), pp. 30-31. Originally published in *Facla*, 28 July 1912.

text is hypnotizing in the manner of iconic manifestos and advertising catchphrases. His compelling style, as in the lyrical repetition of the last sentence, rides the same thin dividing line between propaganda and poetry, as the Dadaist manifestos.

The irreverent portrayal of King Carol I outraged Nicolae Iorga. Such were the strange ways of early twentieth-century Romania, that Iorga's ethnic nationalism entailed loyalty to a German king. Iorga accused *Facla* of treason, pornography and hooliganism, contending that it represented an attack on national values by Jewish elements:

The socialist-Judaic alliance, united by vanity and greed, controls several papers which pretend not to know of each other, but work jointly and systematically, according to smart calculations. *Dimineața* [The Morning] issues only carefully selected news; *Adivor* [The Truth] reviews the politics of Romanians from Romania and from other provinces, systematically slipping in blarneys for their favourites which are also the enemies of our nation, and slander about their enemies, which set themselves apart from socialist and Zionist Israel; *Rampa* [The Ramp] makes panorama literature with colourful glass, multifaceted mirrors, drums and various wax figures, and *Facla* smears the door of decent people with filth from the streets, stored in the pockets of its renegades and unfrocked.<sup>41</sup>

Iorga's editorial altogether circumvents the issues raised by Cocea, regarding malgovernance and corruption. Instead, Iorga capitalizes on nationalist paranoia, foregrounding the alleged danger posed to Romania by the conspiracy between the Jewish minority and socialism.<sup>42</sup> In a move typical of mystifying nationalist propaganda, Iorga redirects all the negative emotive content, pertaining to the very concrete social and political problems, to an invisible yet all the more urgent threat, which is also conveniently foreign. Surprisingly, in doing so, he is using a few of the colourful glass, mirrors, drums and wax figures he imputes to *Rampa*, and starts sounding a bit Dada. Paradoxically, the challenge of describing the provocative style of the socialist press forces Iorga's nationalist rhetoric out of its expressive boundaries.

---

<sup>41</sup> Nicolae Iorga, "Două procese", p. 1345.

Tovarasia socialist-iudaica, unita prin vanitate si lacomie, dispune de mai multe foi, care se fac a nu sti una de alta, dar lucreaza sistematic si solidar, dupa socoteli istete. <<Dimineata>> da numai stiri intr'ales; <<Adivor>> judeca politica Romanilor din Romania si din celelalte provincii, strecurand sistematic lingusirea favoritelor sai, care sunt si dusmanii natiunii noastre, si clevetirea dusmanilor sai, cari s'au deosebit fata de Israelul zionist si socialist; <<Rampa>> face literatura de panorama, cu sticle colorate, oglinzi cu multe fete, darabane si felurite figuri de ceara, iar <<Facla>> unge cu murdarii de pe strada, depositate in buzunarele renegatilor si raspopilor sai, usile oamenilor cum se cade.

<sup>42</sup> In one of those cruel ironies of history, Iorga's paranoid vision came true after World War II, when Romania was Sovietized by USSR. Jewish intellectuals, most notably Ana Pauker, played an important role in the Romanian Socialist Party which took over in 1944.



In response to Iorga's attack, *Facla's* August 1912 issue featured Isac's pastiche bucolic story "Familia Popescu" [The Popescu Family] which criticizes Romanian parochialism:

I remember them, their house, property, habits, words, with sweet and incomprehensible emotion. Every time I think of them, I have the feeling I lived a part of my life in the Stone Age, that I was a contemporary of the mammoth and the cave men, that I witnessed the first mumblings of words and the first unsuccessful civilizing attempts on the human species. The Popescu family lived in the middle of the twentieth-century after Christ, a post mile from the railway, a few steps away from the school building, and the telegraph and telephone office, the way they lived, surely, one thousand, two thousand, five thousand years ago. The noisy and flourishing civilization passed by the gates of this miraculous family without stirring their curiosity and without touching them. Its members used some of the inventions of the time, but only mechanically, almost with the same superb indifference with which a worm builds his burrow in a tree hollow or in the shelves of a library. They had everything in the house. Wick lamps, bronze bedsteads, illustrated postal cards, and among other shiny and useless things, a gramophone. They knew the value of the alarm clock and the utility of the night pot. But that's it!<sup>43</sup>

Parodying the corny sentimentalism of *Sămănătorism*, Isac's piece attacks the nationalists' core values. The choice of the typically Romanian name, Popescu, which both means "son of a priest" and refers to the family of a priest in the story, alludes to the nationalists' agenda, so invested in ethnicity and religious values. By emphasizing modernizing features, which are completely at variance with the family's mindset, Isac exposes their anachronistic ethos. At odds with the technological advances of the time, Iorga and his supporters advocated a return to preindustrial rural values, as Isac's story ironically illustrates. According to the nationalists, the village represented Romania's authentic culture. Isac's emphatic enumeration of modern Western comforts which facilitate the Popescus' domestic torpor, shows up the crass

---

<sup>43</sup> Emil Isac, "Familia Popescu" [The Popescu Family], *Facla*, 18 August 1912, 646-48 (pp. 646-47).

Mi-aduc aminte de ei, de casa, de gospodaria, de obiceiurile, de vorbele lor, cu o emotie dulce si inexplicabila. De cate ori ma gandesc la dansii, am impresia ca am trait o parte din viata mea in epoca de piatra, ca am fost contimporan cu mamutul si cu oamenii locuintele lacustre, ca am asistat la primele ingaimari de cuvinte si la intaile incercari neizbutite de civilizatie ale speciei omenesti. Familia Popescu traia in mijlocul veacului al douazecilea dela Christos, la o posta de calea ferata, la cativa pasi de cladirea scoalei si de oficiul telegraphic si telephonic, cum se traia de sigur si acum o mie', doua mii, si acum cinci mii de ani. Civilizatia zgomotoasa si in floritoare trecea pe la poarta acestei miraculoase familii, fara sa-i destepte curiozitatea si fara s'o atinga. Membrii ei se foloseau de unele inventii ale vremii, dar in chip mechanic, aproape cu aceeasi superba indiferenta cu care un vierme isi face culcusul in scorbura unui copac sau in rafturile unei biblioteci. In casa aveau de toate. Lampi cu fitil, paturi de bronz, carti postale ilustrate si printre alte lucruri sclipitoare si inutile de bazar, un gramofon. Cunoasteau valoare ceasornicului desteptator si utilitatea oalei de noapte. Dar atat!

materialism and hypocrisy of Romanian bourgeoisie. The text picks on the issues flagged by Maiorescu and Caragiale, about the shallow assimilation of Western modernity, but this time from a progressive perspective, deploring the parochialism of Romanian culture.

By way of well-versed sarcasm, the author challenges the bourgeois stasis, the nauseatingly boring life mired in routine, convention and meaninglessness:

For a whole year, with the regularity of a clock, I listened at set hours, in the same words, the same needs, the same joys, the same pains, each expressed three hundred and sixty times per year. In the morning, the priest left for the church with the same joke and returned recounting the same events. The priest's wife complained about household problems. The daughter-in-law cooked the same dishes. The same dogs gathered around the table. [...] And all the book worms in the Popescu family, with their eyes in their bowls or with their hands on their stomachs, chewed for three hundred and sixty-five days a year the copious fat of the same dishes and the fugitive shadow of the same obscure thought.<sup>44</sup>

The paragraph's repetitions and cumulative movement create a dreamlike atmosphere characteristic of absurdist plays – the simultaneous familiarity and eeriness of a de-centred consciousness of reality. In good modernist fashion, the form drives the content, the rhythm and structure of the sentences, bespeaking the mindless monotony of bourgeois life. The strange collusion of modernist form, revolutionary thought and satire sharpens Isac's commentary. A stylistically accomplished critique of bourgeois nationalism, "Familia Popescu" is congruent with Dada both in its antibourgeois ideology, and its iconoclastic aesthetics.

*Neamul Românesc* invariably retaliated in xenophobic vein: "Facla' microscopic review for the amplification and exaggeration of the smallest Romanian defects and the careful concealment of the greatest Jewish sins."<sup>45</sup> To this, *Facla* responded by publishing Isac's

---

<sup>44</sup> Isac, "Familia", p. 647.

Un an intreg cat am stat in casa lor, cu regularitatea ceasornicului din perete, am auzit la ore anumite, in cuvinte neschimbate, aceleasi nevoi, aceleasi bucurii, aceleasi dureri, exprimate fiecare de treisute saizeci deori pe an. Dimineata popa pleca la biserica cu aceeasi gluma si se intorcea povestind aceleasi intamplari. Preoteasa se vaita de grijile gospodariei. Nora pregatea aceleasi bucate. In jurul mesei se adunau aceeasi caini. Dupa pranz se adunau la sfat aceiasi musafiri, si aceleasi conversatii marunte si intrigi infinite din oraselul provincial, asupra acelasii probleme de bucatarie si de bune gospodine, se insirau ca tacanitul monoton si adormitor al boabelor de matanii [...] Un an intreg n'am auzit o vorba spusă cu glas mai tare ca de obicei, un scrasnit surd de revolta, un suspin de ideal. Si toti carturarii familiei Popestilor, cu ochii in strachini sau cu mainele pe burta, rumegau trei sute saizeci si cinci de zile pe an grasimea abundenta a aceluiasi fel de bucate si umbra fugitive a aceluiasi gand obscur.

<sup>45</sup> Grigore T. Popa, "Tot 'Zdreanta Rosie'" [Again the 'Red Rag'], *Neamul Românesc*, 98-99 (3 Sept. 1912), 1669-76 (p. 1675).

“Melodii Bizare. Două inmortantari” [Bizarre Melodies. Two Funerals]. The piece exposes the hypocrisy and cynicism of the Romanian clergy who insisted on interring the dead despite the imminent threat of epidemic outbursts:

At the front there came two boys with the cross, then two citizens which represented the Romanian “pride” and cowardice – there followed the coffin and behind it the priests – yes, the priests. Both of them drunk, with red noses and white sideburns, with empty and stupid faces, like two boxes of life lacking lustre. Alas, what eyes, full of Mr. Iorga’s aphorisms, full of night and tiredness – reeking of brandy and Rostopsin (German liquor brand). [...] I went to see the funeral. And I will never forget the brutality with which the two priests showed the emptiness of their souls. This was an intellectual torture for me, grinding my teeth that all this – oh, that you, Romanian people, wake up – all this happened in the twentieth-century, in Romania, in Galati [Moldavian town] – among Romanians.<sup>46</sup>

The connection between Iorga’s ideology and the mind-set of the clergy, alluded to in Isac’s previous lampoon, is made plain here. The powerful images describing the priests’ depravity – the “night and tiredness” in their eyes, “the emptiness of their souls” – target the Sămănătorists’ backwardness and obtuseness.

Interestingly, “Bizarre Melodies. Two Funerals”, like “The Bishops” article in *Simbolul*, is a political lampoon framed by symbolist aesthetics. An Art Nouveau woodcut decorates the article which seems to be divided, as the title and the layout suggest, between its polemical and its lyrical dimensions (see Figure 6). The symbolist ring of the first part of the title is continuous with the notation of private feeling and reminiscence which opens the piece:

When I cannot write about life, since life gave me everything I asked for: dead wealth, bad women, good prayers, beautiful parents – when, I say, life does not worry me, for I know its meaning sufficiently – I descend to the cellar of my memories and I bring to light my dead impressions, as the savant would bring from the bottom of the earth, from murky pits, the stone of pain.<sup>47</sup>

---

<<Facla>> , revista microscop pentru marirea si exagerarea celor mai mici defecte romanesti si ascunderea cu multa grija a celor mai mari pacate evreiesti.

<sup>46</sup> Emil Isac, “Melodii Bizare. Două inmortantari”, *Facla*, 41 (18 or 13 Oct. 1912), p. 824.

In frunte veneau doi baeti cu crucea, apoi doi cetateni cari reprezentau lipsa de curaj si ‘ambitiul’ roman – urma dricul cu cosciugul si in dosul lui *popii* – da popii...Betii amandoi, cu nas rosu si cu perciuni albi, cu fata seaca, proasta, ca doua cutii de viata in care lipsesc stralucirile. Oh, ce ochi – plini de aforismele lui Iorga, plini de noapte si oboseala – aburand de rachie si de Rostopsin. [...] M-am dus sa vad inmormantarea. Si n-o sa uit niciodata brutalitatea aceia, in care doi popi si-au aratat toata pustietatea sufletului si in care am fost torturat intelectualiceste, scrasnind in dinti, ca toate aceste, oh, desteapta-te romane – toate acestea s-au intamplat in secolul al XX-lea, in Romania, in Galati – intre Romani.

<sup>47</sup> Isac, “Melodii”, p. 823.

However, the symbolist conventions are exaggerated to such an extent, that the text borders on pastiche. The open avowal of wealth and vice, streaked with tautologies and non-sequiturs, is a caricatural performance of symbolist cant. Similarly, the ennui and the mysticism are overdrawn as if in a tongue-in-cheek fulfilment of the Sămănătorist critique of decadentism. By re-diverting symbolist forms for the polemical purpose of the lampoon, Isac is already a good way on the path to avant-garde banter.

---

Cand nu mai pot scrie de viata, caci viata mi-a dat cate am cerut: bogatie moarta, femei rele, rugaciuni bune, parinti frumosi – spui cand viata nu ma mai nelinisteste, caci rostul ei il cunosc indeajuns – ma cobor in beciul amintirilor si aduc la lumina impresiile mele moarte, cum ar aduce din fundul pamantului, din ocne beznose, savantul piatra durerii.



## Melodii bizare

### Doua înmormântări

Cînd nu mai pot seria de viață, căci viața toate mi-a dat cîte am cerut: bogăție moartă, femei rele, rugăciuni bune, părinți frumoși— spui căd viața nu mă mai neliniștește, căci rostul ei îl cunosc îndeajuns — mă cobor în beciul amintirilor și aduc la lumină impresiile mele moarte, cum ar aduce din fundul pămîntului, din ocna beznoase, savantul piatra durerii... Și răscolind în geamantanul iluziilor mele, între atitea sticlute de parfum, fotografii de amante și cravate vechi, aflu o carte postată din Gotha... Krematorium... Imi aduc aminte de acel moment tragic—și totuși bizar și frumos, cînd în loc de înmormîntarea orientală a neamului nostru, am văzut dispărînd un leș în flacări, prefăcîndu-se în cenuse albastră, scinteeatoare de ultimii stropi de unsoare a oaselor — și aducîndu-mi aminte de momentul acela, imi aduc aminte de sfința senzație ce m-a cuprins atuncia, cînd un trup alcătuit cu atita măiestrie de-un Alcătuitor cinic—s'a sfărmat, s'a topit, s'a prefăcut în materie absoletă tăcută... Krematorium.

Era toamnă cum este și astăzi. Hoinăream pe străzile Gothei, cum nu mai pot hoinări astăzi pe străzile Clujului. Căutam cafenele discrete, femei calde or rugăciuni suverane—și de-odată m'am oprit în fața unui palat alb și rece, un fel de cavou-teatru, cu fațadă visătoare și cu ferestre negre. Krematorium... Institutul de imortalizare, afurisit de preoți, lăudat de savanți și temut de bolnavii spitalului. Și orcum, un protest al luminei împotriva dogmei proaste — o învingere a intelectualismului asupra bigotiei burgheze, care aruncă cadavrul în pămînt, ca să ajungă pradă viermilor și în loc de-o descompunere radicală, în loc de-o splen-

Figure 6: Facla no. 41 (18 October 1912).

The adjoining article “‘Neamul Românesc’ Zgârie Brânză” [*Neamul Românesc* Skinflint], by Arghezi under the penname of Block Notes, is less roundabout in its charge of the nationalists. Review *Neamul Românesc*’s article “What a Transylvanian sees in Bucharest”, Arghezi writes:

Our nationalists, so definitively sore with *Facla*, finish all their articles with a curse against *Facla*. [...] And then pretending they are ignoring *Facla* which they read with an extremely regular appetite - it’s their necessary evil – their soul rids itself of caustic and acid outbursts, but this bitterness actually stays within them and keeps on burning. In a more flourished way, we could say it is constipated diarrhoea. They then say *Facla* is a “vile”, “sold out”, “kike” sheet – it’s difficult, with such a serious lack of polemic talent and real cerebral substance, to get out of the tyranny of a padlock of three or four words, which squeezes with its ring your lips and tongue, burden of extreme filth instead of any idea.<sup>48</sup>

It must have been very frustrating indeed, for Arghezi and his *Facla* colleagues, to see all debates reduced to racial issues. The tyranny of words, as Arghezi aptly put it, is exactly what the nonsensical Dadaist texts were assailing, and claiming unpalatable lexemes for an alternative, ideologically liberated semantics was part of that project. Arghezi’s foul language, like the Dadaist linguistic irreverence, countered the violence and intolerance masked by what was perceived as patriotic discourse. Obscenity was both a desperate attempt to shock the readers into awareness, and a critique of those social and political values that language insidiously naturalized.

*Neamul Românesc*’s issue of 19 October 1912 sanctioned both Isac’s and Arghezi’s interventions. A note entitled “Pentru jigodii și jigăanii” [For Twerps and Beasts] admonished Isac for his article “Bizarre Melodies”:

Mr. Emil Isac, the erotic and chlorotic literate of <<Facla>>, <<Noua Revista Româna>> [The New Romanian Review] and of I don’t know which other decadent-symbolist gutter press, endeavours to convince the readers, in an outburst of

---

<sup>48</sup> Tudor Arghezi, “‘Neamul Românesc’ Zgârie Branza” [*Neamul Românesc* Skinflint], *Facla*, 41 (18 Oct. 1912), 821-22 (p. 822).

Nationalistii nostrii, fripti atat de definitiv cu *Facla*, isi termina toate articolele lor cu un bluestem impotriva *Facli*. [...] Si-atunci prefacandu se ca ignora *Facla* pe care o citesc cu o pofta foarte regulate – e raul lor necesar –, se scapa sufletul lor cu o iesire acida si caustic, dar de un causticism ce ramane de fapt intr-insic, ca sa continue sa-i arza. Intr-o forma mai imbobocita am putea spune ca-i o diaree cu constipatie. Ei zic atunci ca *Facla* e-o foae ‘marsava’, ‘vanduta’, ‘jidaneasca’ – e greu intr-o lipsa atat de grava de talent polemic si de substanta cerebrala reala, sa iesi din tirania unui lacat de 3-4 cuvinte, care te strange cu belciugul de buze si de limba, bagaj de mizerie cumulata si drept orice idee.

nymphomania published by <<Facla>>, under the title <<Bizarre Melodies: Two Funerals>>, that he will be eaten by worms after death, because he is a Romanian.<sup>49</sup>

Despite its vehement refutation of *Facla*'s sensationalist strategies and unscrupulous style, *Neamul Românesc* was no less discourteous. Both *Neamul Românesc* and *Facla* relied on their enemies' reaction in order to perpetuate scandal. The nationalists' reaction to Block-Notes' (Arghezi's penname) invectives is equally obscene:

Mr. "Block-Notes", *Facla*'s collaborator, who, from his style, can be no other than the ex-monk Iosif, tasting the article published in *Neamul Românesc*, "What a Transylvanian sees in Bucharest", describes it as "constipated diarrhoea". We congratulate him for the analysis and we wish him "bon appetite".

By the time *Simbolul* entered the belligerent scene, the exchange between the socialists and Iorga's nationalists had become completely crazy. The provocative article "The Bishops in My Family", in *Simbolul*'s first issue, was a kickback for *Neamul Românesc*'s admonition of Isac. Its absurdity combatted the nationalist tyranny of words, that "burden of extreme filth", which was *Neamul Românesc*'s blind anti-Semitism:

At long last, the bishops in my family, the wise and gentle bishops came. The old one came first. Supported by a crutch, with an apostle's mien, he approached my bed slowly, he checked my pulse, touched my forehead and said resignedly:

– "Go back to God, you lamb lost in the woods of darkness, for the wolves will kill you..." (Saint Chatterbox, XXII, 2). And I, the lost lamb, smiled – I kissed his ... face, and I told him:

– Your High Holiness ... go...and I sent him far away, further than Paris ... very, very far.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Nicolae Iorga, "Pentru Jigodii si Jiganii", *Neamul Românesc*, VII 119 (19 October 1912), p. 2041.

D. Emil Isac, literatul erotic si clorotic al *Faclei*, *Noii Reviste Romane* si a nu stiu mai carii fituici simbolisto-decadente, intr-un acces de nimfomanie publicat in *Facla*, supt titlului "Melodii bizare: doua inmormantari", se sileste sa convinga cetitorii ca dupa moarte o sa-l manance viermii pentru ca e Roman.

<sup>50</sup> Isac, "Protopopii", p. 3.

Au venit in sfarsit protopopii familiei mele, frazele cuminte ale vietii, bunii si blanzii protopopi. A venit intai cel mai batran. Sprijinit pe-o carje, cu figura unui apostol, se apropia incet de patul meu, mi-a pipai pulsus si fruntea si zise resignat:

–"Intoarce-te la Dumnezeu miel ratacit in codrul intunericului caci te vor ucide lupii..." (Sf. Treanca Fleanca, XXII, 2). Si eu mielul ratacit, am zambit – i-am sarutat...fata, si i-am zis:

– Inalt Prea Sfintite ... du-te... si l-am trimis mai departe de Paris, ... departe de tot.

By parodying the form of the Holy Scripture, the piece jeers at the very crux of the Christian doctrine. The suspension dots suppress and flaunt, at the same time, the obscene implications. The trip “further than Paris” hints to a common Romanian swear word referring to incestuous sexuality. Romanians often convey the swearing euphemistically by suppressing the last part, which designates the female genitalia, or by replacing it with an apparently inoffensive but otherwise suggestive locution, as Isac did by inserting “further than Paris...very, very far”. The pause between “kissed his” and “face” disrupts the common expectation that a priest’s hand should be kissed. Kissing the face, instead, is blasphemous transgression of Romanian Orthodox propriety. Alternatively, depending on how far the reader’s imagination wishes to go, the insinuation could refer to another infamous Romanian expression – involving the backside of a human body – which stands for bootlicking.

In view of the blasphemous nonsense and the evocative reference to Voltaire, the ending of the article qualifies for an entry in the Dada anthology:

Today I am at the estate of an uncle, the seventy year-young bishop, I drink milk, talk to Voltaire, play cards with the ripe wife – and the decadent Emil Isac, I feel great next to so many holy icons, incense, communion bread, basil flowers, holy oils, etc, etc, and today, Sunday, I tolled the church bells.<sup>51</sup>

This was not an unusual feat for Isac who had a longstanding miscreant reputation. Apart from the iconoclastic lampoons published in *Facla*, he had also written the erotic melodrama “Maica cea Tânără” [The Young Nun]. The play scandalized the traditionalist audience of the Bucharest National Theatre. Isac was accused of blasphemy for portraying the amorous tribulations of a young nun who ended up committing a murder of passion.<sup>52</sup>

Although *Simbolul* was not yet avant-garde, with most of the contributions still moored in a redundant Symbolism, the steady influence of the socialist pamphlet was ready to explode its aesthetic frame. Well-versed in the lampoon genre, the leftist symbolists found their lyrical pieces ravaged by corrosive irony. Amongst the most experimental contributions to *Simbolul*,

---

<sup>51</sup> Isac, “Protopopii”, p. 4.

Astazi sunt la mosia unui unchiu, protopopul tanar de vreo sapte-zeci de ani, beau lapte, vorbesc cu Voltaire, joc carti cu nevasta coapta – si decadentul Emil Isac, ma simt foarte bine alaturi de atatea icoane sfinte, tamaie, prescuri, flori de busuioc, uleiuri sfinte, etc, etc, si astazi Dumineca, am tras eu clopotele la biserica.

<sup>52</sup> Cernat, p. 50. According to the “Theatrical Chronicle”, *Tribuna*, 23/ XVI (28 January 1912), the play was staged on the 23 January 1912. It was integrally published in *Noua Revista Romana*, 14/XI (29 January 1912), pp. 211-15.



were Adrian Maniu's pieces, as Cernat rightly points out.<sup>53</sup> As opposed to Isac, who remains firmly in the lampoon genre, Maniu projects the topical subversiveness to the formal level. His absurdist prose poem "Noapte de Mai" [May Night] is a burlesque pastiche of a poem by the symbolist doyen, Alexandru Macedonski. Maniu's poem overturns the symbolist clichés, thus creating irreverent and witty images:

The lilac raises his blossoms like prayers in the night and one perceives better than ever its sweet odour of cheap perfume.

The quail repeats herself, becomes boring, boring.

Signalling the erosion of the symbolist repertoire by the radical irony of political satire, Maniu's subversive reinterpretation anticipates Dada's liberating logical lapses: "Two women stand by the gates luring those who don't want to come and driving away those who wish to stay."<sup>54</sup>

"Mirela", an experimental piece immediately adjacent, which tells the tale of Brutus's betrayal by his lover Mirela, employs striking images of modernist despondency. The desolate decorum is at once reaffirmed and redeemed by the pervasiveness of journals – a modernist fetish of sorts, which functions as a last resort both literally and metaphorically for the young hero, as it had done for the socialist author and his fellows:

It was a shabby room – the damp was gnawing at the blistered plaster, on which the journals were hanging like leaves in a typographic autumn.<sup>55</sup>

The fact that the betrayed hero is called Brutus, after the legendary traitor, borders on avant-garde playfulness. Brutus is a victim of the philistine callousness of his uncle who first refuses to offer financial support and then seduces his beloved Mirela, causing him to commit suicide. The sovereigns "laughed from the wall" at the protagonist's tragi-comic debacle, Isac writes,

---

<sup>53</sup> Their significant contribution to Romanian modernism remains even today incredibly underestimated, reflecting the obscure politics of canonization. The few exegeses of their work are cursory and mostly unjust. Adrian Maniu's influence on expressionist poet Lucian Blaga has nevertheless been acknowledged by critic Ovid Crohmălniceanu. See *Literatura română*, II, pp. 73-87.

<sup>54</sup> Adrian Maniu *Noapte de Mai* [May Night], *Simbolul*, 3 (1 December 1912), p. 46.

In noapte liliacul isi ridica, ca o ruga in florire si simti mai bine ca ori cand, ca liliacul are un miros dulce de parfum prost.

Pitpalacul se repeta, devine plicticos, plicticos. [...]

La poarta stau doua femei si chiama pe cei ce nu vor sa vina, si gonesc pe cei ce vor sa ramaie.

<sup>55</sup> Adrian Maniu, *Mirela*, *Simbolul*, 3 (1 December 1912), p. 46.

Era o odaie saraca – igrasia macina tencuiala bubuoasa, de pe care jurnalele atarnau deslipite, ca frunzele intr-o toamna tipografica.

alluding to the cynicism of the ruling class.<sup>56</sup> Brutus' story of personal misfortunes has wider social and political implications. It is an allegorical critique of the older generation (represented by the uncle), which dictates the values of a corrupt society.

In *Minciuni Trăite* [Lived Lies], Maniu does away with all syntactical and logical restrictions to create a defamiliarized and psychotic textual world, complete with fictitious footnotes which elaborate on the physical attributes of the manuscript:

You are going to understand me – and be quiet. You are not going to understand me, then you will by all means answer me. [...] Listen. Once upon a time, because every now was once upon a time, and Christmas was that day. And I decided beforehand to love a woman who belonged to everybody. (Give yourself to everybody and you will be Jesus). And I was loving her on the holy night when the bells toll and when the people stay in and stuff themselves on copious meals under big lamps, precisely because I knew she was going to be alone, the thought which taught love without loving. In the end it could have been a different day or a different night, a different woman or a different connotation. [...] I love you because you have a snake's neck and because on your chest, I see your ribs like the keyboard of an organ and because the sharp hip is a pyramid and because of the long legs of a green locust.<sup>57</sup>

The non-sequiturs, alongside the offensive allusions to religion, prostitution, and bourgeois hypocrisy and greed, position this text well outside the symbolist ambit. Socialist ideas and critique strategies coalesce with the leftovers of an extenuated Symbolism, to yield subversive forms.

By comparison, Tzara's contributions to *Simbolul* are rather tame. "Cântec" is, for instance, a dispirited romanza of morbid sensibility:

Raining..  
Time is dripping its beat away on the window of my beloved.  
Raining..  
And our love expires.  
Like the time which dribbles on the window of my beloved;

---

<sup>56</sup> "suveranii noștrii radeau din perete".

<sup>57</sup> Adrian Maniu, *Minciuni Trăite* [Lived Lies], *Simbolul*, 4 (25 December 1912), p. 55.

Tu ai sa ma intelegi – si ai sa taci. Tu nu ai sa ma intelegi, atunci ai sa raspunzi neaparat. [...] Asculti. Era odata, fiindca oricare acum era odata, si Craciunul era acea zi. Si o hotarasem dinainte pentru ca sa iubesc o femeie care era a tuturor. (Fii a tuturor si vei fi Isus). Si o iubeam in noaptea sarbatorii cand clopotele bat si cand oamenii stau in casa si se imbuiba la mese bogate subt lampi mari, tocmai fiindca stiam ca in noaptea aceea va fi singura, cugetarea care a dat iubire fara sa iubeasca. La urma urmei putea sa fie o alta zi sau o alta noapte, o alta femeie sau o alta subintelegere. [...] Te iubesc fiindca gatul tau e de sarpe si fiindca pe pieptul tau coastele le inteleg ca pe o gama de orga si soldul ascutit piramida si picioarele lungi ca lacusta verde.

Raining..<sup>58</sup>

Critics have noted strong influences from Romanian symbolist poet of provincial desolation, George Bacovia, and the light-hearted musicality of second-generation symbolist Ion Minulescu.<sup>59</sup> Whereas *Pe râul vieții* [On the river of life] anticipates the socialist imagery of Tzara's World War II poetry:

They travel, they travel, slowly rowing,  
On the river of life, so sad  
And dirty,  
They travel, they travel ever forward,  
Their eyes forever set on  
The blue horizon ahead  
And dawns,  
Woven in shining sun,  
They travel towards seas,  
Towards illusive seas.

Every so often  
they glimpse,  
on the river of life so sad,  
and dirty,  
a carcass,  
or a coffin,  
and lonely boats,  
like ghosts  
appearing from afar.  
Borne silently  
By a sad unchanging fate.  
(By dark waves and wind).

Yet other boats,  
Float, float still forward,  
Borne by eternal thoughts  
of ever forward,  
The urge,  
Drives them yet forward,  
Towards the country of blue seas,  
Where the sky is clear: –  
They don't even think

---

<sup>58</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Cântec* [Song], *Simbolul*, 2 (15 November 1912), p. 23.

Ploua.../Ploua Timpul in cadente in fereastra dragii mele.../Ploua.../Si iubirea noastra trece/ Ca si timpul care bate in fereastra dragii mele;/ Ploua...

<sup>59</sup> See Cernat, p. 49, and Crohmălniceanu, *Evreii*, pp. 47-8. Minulescu edited the symbolist reviews *Revista Celor'alti* and *Insula*.

Of death or broken boats <sup>60</sup>

Although Tzara was only 16 years of age, the poem has a surprisingly confident and insightful voice. The casual tone, flexible prosody and political awareness recall Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, which Tzara translated and published in *Versuri și Proză* [Verse and Prose].<sup>61</sup> The semantic focus on movement, and the ideologically inflected imagery – the river of life, the clear sky, blue sea and shining sun – anticipate his later communist pieces. Similarly, the utopian/dystopian antinomy and the reference to the casualties of historical progress have a Marxist ring.

If there is a clear continuity between Tzara's post-Dada French poetic and his pre-avant-garde pieces written in Romanian, as the author himself noted, it is more difficult to retrace the linguistic radicalism of the Dada adventure.<sup>62</sup> However hard we look into his early

---

<sup>60</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Pe râul vieții, Simbolul 1* (25 Oct. 1912), pp. 10-12.

Ei merg, ei merg vaslind alene /Pe raul Vietii-atat de trist,/ Si de murdar,/ Ei merg, ei merg tot inainte,/ Caci vecinic vad 'naintea lor/ Albastre zari/ Si-aurore/ Tesute-n aur lucitor, –/ Ei merg spre mari/ Spre mari himere.

Din cand in cand,/ Se deslusesc/ Pe raul Vietii atat de trist,/ Si de murdar,/ Vre-un cadavru,/ Un sicriu,/ Si barci stinghere/ Care par/ Din departare ca's naluci,/ Si sunt purtate in tacere/ De-un trist si neschimbat destin,/ (De valuri negre si de vant).

Dar altele,/ Plutesc, plutesc mereu 'nainte,/ Puratate de un vecinic gand/ De "mai departe"/ Si-un avant/ Li mana vecinic inainte/ Spre tara marilor albastre/ In care cerul e senin; – /Ei nici macar nu se gandesc,/ La morti, si la barci sparte...

<sup>61</sup> Hentea, p. 76.

<sup>62</sup> In a letter of 17 January 1934 addressed to Sasa Pana, the Romanian editor of *The First Poems*, Tzara wrote:

Le titre 'Poèmes d'avant-dada' laisserait supposer une espèce de rupture dans ma personne poétique si je puis m'exprimer ainsi, due a quelque chose qui se serait produit en dehors de moi (le déchainement d'une croyance simili-mystique, pour ainsi dire : dada) qui a proprement parler n'a jamais existe, car il y a eu continuité par à-coups plus ou moins violents et déterminants, si vous voulez, mais continuité et entre-pénétration quand-même, liée au plus baut [sic, 'haut' most probably intended] degré, a une nécessité latente.

With regards to Tzara's Romanian poetry, the literary critic Marc Alyn wrote in *Le Figaro Littéraire*:

En effet, on croit, généralement, que la poésie de Tzara s'est déployée selon un itinéraire allant de la destruction au lyrisme [...] Or 'Les Premiers Poèmes' me paraissent prouver précisément le contraire: Tzara a ses débuts était déjà un élégiaque de grade soufflé, aimant sans doutes les rapprochements insolites [...] et s'exprimant pour ainsi dire d'emblée an vers libre mais annonçant beaucoup plus, en définitive, le lyrisme souveraine de la maturité que le dynamiteur du langage de la brève – mais éclatante – période dadaïste.

poetry written before Zurich, we are not able to discern those future Dadaist disjunctions, the total collapse of syntax and logic. Closer to Tzara's absurdist aphorisms in the Dada manifestos are Isac's and Maniu's texts published in *Simbolul*, with which they share the anti-bourgeois rhetoric and the irreverent style. Compare, for example, these extracts from *Seven Dada Manifestos*: "We are circus ringmasters and we can be found whistling amongst the winds of fairgrounds, in convents, prostitutions, theatres, realities, feelings, restaurants, ohoho, bang bang"; or "The attempt of Jesus and the Bible, conceal under their ample benevolent wings: shit, animals and days".<sup>63</sup> When confronting Tzara's Dada work with the lampoons in *Simbolul*, it becomes apparent that Tzara continued and elaborated on his Romanian colleagues' left-wing rhetoric strategies in a cryptic web of playful references and allusions which reiterated the terms of their critique.

#### **4. Chemarea. "The appearance of this review is obnoxious."**<sup>64</sup>

Three years after *Simbolul*'s demise, *Chemarea*, which inaugurated the penname Tristan Tzara, kicked off in force with a memorable line advertising its iconoclasm. Even if graphically less elaborate – it is obvious that the publication had fewer resources – *Chemarea* is more confidently subversive, more upfront about its socialist leanings and less indebted to Symbolism (see Figure 7). The review's strong political edge bears the editorial hallmark of Tzara's best friend, Ion Vinea, whose brilliant feature pieces are as buoyant as the Dadaist manifestos. After his apprenticeship at *Facla* and *Rampa*, where his mentors were the talented lampoonists N.D. Cocea and Tudor Arghezi, Vinea knew how to create a stir. An accomplished poet himself, he combined Maniu's aesthetic audacity with Cocea's critical eloquence, achieving a confident avant-garde voice.<sup>65</sup>

---

Quoted in "Insurectia de la Zurich prezentata de Sasa Pana", *Primele Poeme* [First Poems] (Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1971), p. 126.

<sup>63</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: John Calder, 1977), pp. 1, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Ion Vinea "Avertisment" in *Chemarea* 1, 4 October 1915, p. 1.

Aparitia acestei reviste e antipatica.

<sup>65</sup> Voinea joined *Facla* in October 1913 to write their "voluptuously cruel" literary reviews, and the satirical tablet "Flocăieli" [Scuffles]. The latter under the penname Evin. See *Facla*, 3 November 1913, and Felix Aderca, *Marturia Unei Generatii. Masti de Marcel Iancu* [The Testimony of a Generation. Masks by Marcel Iancu] (Bucharest: S. Ciornei, 1929), p. 365

*Chemarea*'s manifesto "Avertisment" (most probably from the French *avertissement* = warning or foreword) advises: "Our review is a question addressed to everybody by a group of writers, journalists and students". By then, World War I had broken out. Even though Romania remained neutral until August 1916, the intolerant and xenophobic war mood was pervasive. Asking questions was not the thing to do. Vinea's piece indicts mass media complicity with state propaganda in an explosive tirade. Here and there, Dada-like assaults on bourgeois and royalist values crop up. About "the amorphous and indistinct" reader falling victim to nationalist rhetoric, he inveighs: "He goes home to drop a urinary tear on the fingers or domestic bird neck of his wife. The tin jewel randomly bought perhaps becomes a family jewel, hereditary like a crown". Aware that war was wrought in editorial offices and on paper, as well as on battlefields, Vinea launches a belligerent call to pens: "Let's then go out with hard armours under our vests. Let's replace the maps in our editorial offices with panoplies at hand; have smoke bombs in our bins and pencils with daggers".<sup>66</sup>

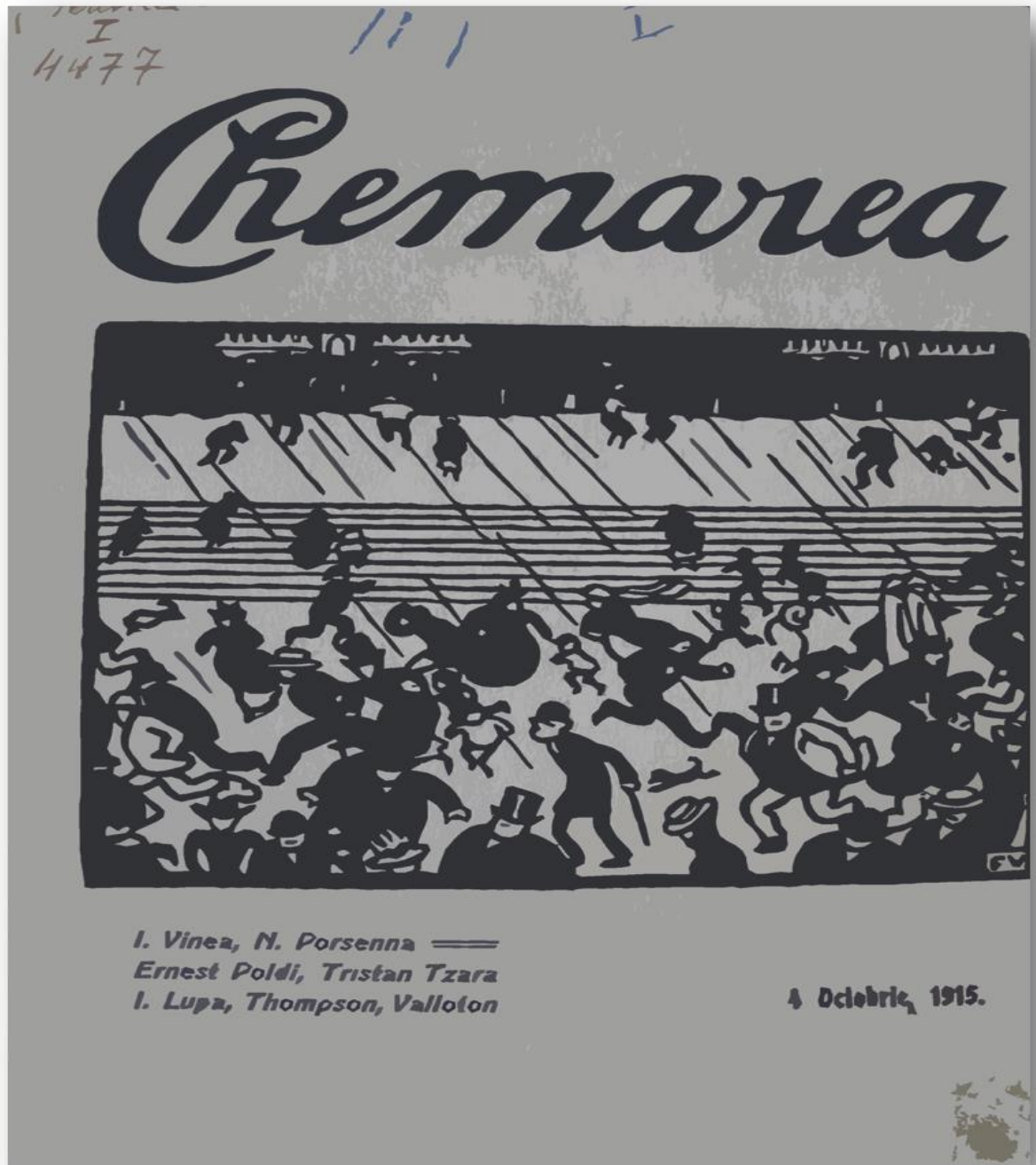
---

<sup>66</sup> Vinea, "Avertisment", p. 2.

Revista noastra e o intrebare, a unui grup de scriitori, ziaristi si studenti adresata tuturor. [..]

Merge acasa ca sa pice o lacrima urinara pe degetele sau pe gatul de pasare domestica a sotiei sale. Tinicheaua intamplator cumparata, devine, poate, o bijuterie familiara, hereditara ca o coroana. [...]

Sa iesim deci cu platose tari sub veste. Sa inlocuim hartile din redactii cu panoplii la indemana; sa avem bombe asfixiante prin cosuri, si creioane cu sis. [...] Dupa ce si-au golit pantecele hemeticii batrani, iar virtutile multora au sangerat pe camasii agitate lautelor plebei, si copii si au manifestat in public pe coli albe ca cearsafurile, incontinenta, acum cel putin e randul celor tineri si chemati, la nevoie, sa lupte, sa se intrebe unde vor fi trimisi.



**Figure 7:** *Chemarea*, 4 October 1915.

In many ways, Dada was the reaction envisaged by Vinea's provocation. Because dialogue was no longer an option, as Vinea had hoped, Dada had to take to verbal bombs and sarcastic daggers to counter the violence inherent in bourgeois ideology. Purging it of all recognizable political content, Tzara revisits Vinea's rhetoric, stressing instead the belligerent potential of form, in the self-fulfilling text of the *1918 Dada Manifesto*: "Every page should explode, either because of its profound gravity, or its vortex, vertigo, newness, eternity, or because of its staggering absurdity, the enthusiasm of its principles, or its typography".<sup>67</sup> The Dadaist Tzara, like Vinea, impugned culture's acquiescence with the brutality of war and sought to dislocate the violence embedded in language and tacitly endorsed by the institution of art. In order to dislocate the repressive bourgeois structures, the Dadaists toppled the linguistic world itself. Radicalizing the manifesto's performative nature, the Dadaist Tzara did what Vinea said, losing in the process the discursive husk.

In good Dadaist fashion, Vinea's anti-war lobby in "Sentimente și Interese" [Feelings and Interests] affects a judicious awareness of the ideological exploitation of language:

The soldiers of three nations die or are waiting to die in the artificial hell of regulated onslaught. [...] A stupid war demanded by those who thought they speak for the free and cold reason, for pure interest; rejected by those who breathe through all their orifices, historical pasts and romantic debts. And we who are called under flags tomorrow, are supposed to accept the moral burden of Italy or Greece and Bulgaria; the words for feelings and interests will harass each other before the general silence.<sup>68</sup>

The lofty principles invoked by nationalist propaganda in order to justify the horrors of war, Vinea argued, camouflaged mercenary cynicism and mean economic interests. The dangerous conflation of feelings and interests not only compromised the moral basis of national communities, of the world's political organisation, but also the premises of human communication. The silence Vinea warns against is the logical consequence of the communication failure triggered by the horrors of mass war. Vinea's critique envisions an existential equivalence between misunderstanding (linguistic misappropriation) and war. The ruthless bourgeois ethos triggered, in his account, an epistemological and ethical crisis whereby

---

<sup>67</sup> Tzara, *Seven*, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> Ion Vinea, "Sentimente și Interese" [Feelings and Interests], *Chemarea*, 4 October 1915, p. 8. Soldatii a trei natiuni, mor, ori asteapta sa moara, in iadul artificial al unui iures reglementar [...] Razboi stupid cerut de cei care-si inchipuiau ca vorbesc pentru ratiunea libera si rece, pentru interesul pur; respins de cei cari respira prin toate orificiile, trecuturi istorice si datorii romantioase. Iar noi chemati sub steaguri maine, s'ar zice ca vom accepta povara morala a Italiei, sau a Greciei si Bulgariei; cuvintele sentimente si interese se vor agasa din nou, inainte tacerii generale.



the extreme violence of the war could be justified. The linguistic cataclysm mirrored the bloodshed. The meaning of words was perverted, and the unity between signified and signifier, form and content unsettled. As the Dadaists were going to show, a linguistic reform was needed as much as a reassessment of values, in order to reimagine the world on peaceful terms.

The war frenzy almost overwhelmed the second number of *Chemarea*. As it became increasingly evident that Romania's entry into the war was inevitable, Vinea's editorial –“Note Repezi” [Quick Notes] – is apocalyptic in tone and syntax:

Under war, the gestures are cowardly. Simultaneous mobilization orders; siege states; premeditated assassinations of pacifists; concerns to overpower the enemy in battles of unequal numbers and means; measures against panic, truth and lies; all the facilities deriving from the isolated buffering of the individual. [...] In times of war, all the beasts shake the secular locks and railings and knock them down. We are the cowardly guardians of our menagerie.<sup>69</sup>

Apart from the already established connection between Dada and anti-war rally, what is most relevant here is Vinea's innovative prowess in delivering his critique. In a classic Dada move, the formal frame of the war report is diverted towards a poignant disquisition of bourgeois ideology. As a rhetorical boost, Vinea gives the text the performative edge characteristic of Dada: the rapid-fire rhythm sustained by the quick succession of incomplete sentences between semi-colons recreates the panic-stricken psychology of war. The fragmentary elliptical style attests to the process of aesthetic radicalization at work in *Chemarea*. This deft leftist critique of the war, which reiterates *Facla*'s position, was also taken over by Tzara in the Dada texts. Besides the stylistic continuity between Vinea's and Tzara's texts, even a cursory survey of the semantic register of the Dada manifestos reveal their indebtedness to Vinea's leftist rhetoric. Tzara blasts a society of “refectories of animals in human garb” which uses art to mask their absurd world. In describing the “sad fable of humanity”, Tzara assigns the artists the role of “circus ringmasters”, thus focusing his social critique on art's role in perpetuating the violent ideology Vinea exposes.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Ion Vinea, “Note Repezi” [Quick Notes], *Chemarea*, 2 (11 October 1914), p. 17. In razboi, gesturile sunt lase. Decretarea cat mai simultana, a mobilizarii; starea de asediu; asasinarea premeditata a pacifistilor; grija de a covarsi pe vrajmas in lupte de numar si mijloace neegale; masuri contra paniceii, contra adevarului si minciunei; toate inlesnirile pe cari le face pufuirea separata a individului. [...] In vremea razboiului, toate fiarele zgaltaie zabrelele si lacatele seculare si le inving. Suntem pazitorii lasi ai menajeriei noastre.

<sup>70</sup> Tzara, *Seven*, pp. 7, 1.

Vinea's texts become more and more outlandish and formally challenging as they gather momentum, replicating the incremental panic and horror of the war, and as if announcing the imminence of the Dadaist insurrection:

The laboratories put together a formula for an explosive, which can more promptly constellate the skies with stars from the regiments' flesh. Children taken away from schools have their backs burdened by knapsacks. Serbian young ladies wash the plagues of Austrian soldiers castrated in captivity. The world goes through sublime moments.<sup>71</sup>

As the world stopped making sense, Vinea's text performs, in an uncanny synthesis of beauty and horror, the semiotic and epistemological impasse triggered by war. The Dada hubbub was imminent but would happen elsewhere – in Zurich – where in a slightly mutated context, Tzara's formal disjunctions, severed from the leftist discourse and cultural polemic, which initially prompted them, became utterly incomprehensible and all the more shocking.

Tzara himself echoed Vinea's war angst in this last of *Chemarea*'s issues. Whereas his earlier poems had been oblivious of political concerns, *Furtuna și Cântecul Dezertorului* [The Storm and the Defector's Song] scrutinizes violence in disinhibited lyrics, displaying a mastery of form uncommon for such a young author. Its tortured rhythm and syntax are in tune with the horror of the war: "The rust-eaten eye points fire/ We enter the mouth of the faraway/ And under the row of garrison teeth, the others/ Are waiting".<sup>72</sup> As Șerban Cioculescu noted, in *Chemarea* Tzara left behind the post-symbolist influences to become a fearless linguistic pioneer.<sup>73</sup> In the three years between *Simbolul* and *Chemarea*, Tzara witnessed the radicalization and finally the collapse of Symbolism under the political weight of the times. Unlike Vinea, whose tone is disconsolately pessimistic, Tzara reaffirms his faith in language. His war poem ends with a prophetic investment in the redemptive power of words: "It is so

---

<sup>71</sup> Vinea, "Note Repezi", p.18.

Laboratoarele incheaga formula unui explozibil care sa consteleze mai prompt cerul, cu astrii de carne ai regimentelor. Copiilor luati scoalei li se impovareaza spatele cu ranite. Domnisoarele sarbe spala plagile austriacilor castrati in captivitate. Lumea trece prin clipe sublime.

<sup>72</sup> Tristan Tzara, *Furtuna și Cântecul Dezertorului* [The Storm and the Defector's Song], *Chemarea*, 11 October 1912, p. 27.

My approximate translation: "Ochiul de rugină mâncat, foc îndreaptă/ Noi intrăm în gura depărtării/ Și sub șirul dinților de fort, ceilalți/ Așteaptă."

A different translation of this poem can be found in *Primele Poeme. First Poems*.

<sup>73</sup> Șerban Cioculescu, *Aspecte Lirice Contemporane* (Bucharest: Casa Scoalelor, 1942), p. 29. Cioculescu (1902-1988), like Ovid Crohmălniceanu (1921-2000) cited above, is one of the Romania's canonical literary critics and historians.

dark, only the words are bright”.<sup>74</sup> Whether the Dada project was to maintain young Tzara’s faith or not, he was ready for Zurich.

---

<sup>74</sup> Tzara, *Furtuna*, p. 27.

“E atât de întuneric, că numai vorbele’s lumină.”

## 5. Conclusion

From Cocea's and Arghezi's first socialist-symbolist joint ventures to their subversive lampoons in *Facla*, to Isac's and Maniu's emancipated aesthetics and Vinea's avant-garde critique, there is a clear continuity of form and purpose. Moreover, the radical irony and polemical edge of the Romanian modernist left dovetails with the tradition of hypercriticism consecrated by *Junimea*. Maiorescu's and Caragiale's use of irony and lampoon as critical strategies, as discussed in previous chapters, remained an abiding feature of Romanian cultural debates. Even the mouldy and stern Sămănătorist leader, Nicolae Iorga, had a knack for irony and verbal abuse.<sup>75</sup> As the issues were aggravated by local social and political problems, mounting resistance to modernization and the rise of extremist ideologies throughout Europe, so disputations became more violent and styles more radical. In a very sophisticated use of satire, political jargon, modernist forms and print resources, the young socialists radicalized Maiorescu's and Caragiale's irreverent critiques.

The very young Tzara capitalized on this practice in his Dadaist manifestos. Modernist aesthetics and Marxism overlapped in Cocea's, Arghezi's and Vinea's incisive ideological rhetoric and satirical critique, on the one hand, and in the absurdist post-Symbolism of Isac and Adrian Maniu, on the other. Yet this unique combination of political radicalism and experimental form only reached its full potential in Tzara's manifestos. The two strands of Romanian modernism, political and aesthetic, were finally entirely at home, if at quite a distance from Romania, in the avant-garde synthesis of communist jargon, tantalizing nonsense and gutsy irreverence, which was the style of the Dada manifestos. Despite the perils and tribulations of translation, Romanian modernism seems to have travelled safely in Tzara's hands.

Once in Zurich, Tzara had all the skills needed to shock the European bourgeoisie. *Facla's* editorial strategies and aesthetics transmigrated to *Simbolul* and *Chemarea* and were consequential for Tzara's development as a major figure of the European avant-garde. Although his Romanian output is rather flimsy and marginal, the political and artistic concerns he shared with the Romanian symbolist and socialist groups permeated his later work. The Romanian experience, his direct or indirect participation in the violent debates which divided the Romanian cultural scene, his encounters with the major players in the quarrel between the

---

<sup>75</sup> See Eugen Lovinescu, *Istoria Literaturii Romane Contemporane*, p. 23.

ancients and the moderns, illuminates the still mystifying eccentricity of Dada. Tzara also brought to Zurich a set of cultural and political issues that consumed the Romanian left-wing intelligentsia he associated with. Romania's acute social and cultural problems, including the extreme social inequality and xenophobia, criticized by the socialist publications in their lampoons, fed into his explosive anti-nationalist Dada aesthetics. When he joined the French Communist Party in the late 1940s, and made his only journey back to Romania as a communist envoy, he formalized a life-long political allegiance, which had begun when he was still a symbolist, and not in Nazi-occupied France. The unlikely alliance between socialism and Symbolism in Romania, furthermore, explains Tzara's peculiarly divided artistic sensibility, the total anarchy of the Dada times, alongside the more palatable lyricism of his mature work. Tzara's case not only illustrates that local contexts, largely overlooked in theories of the avant-garde, impacted on the development of avant-garde practices; it also points to the diversity of the avant-garde's sources. That the confrontational aesthetic of the left-wing pamphlet alongside symbolist aesthetic self-consciousness, and the confrontational intertextuality of the heated debates between the Romanian modernist left and nationalists fed into Tzara's manifestos attests to a polymorphous and porous avant-garde, whose forms were not only conceptual and self-critical, as Bürger suggests, but also dialogical in the iconoclastic stance they adopted. Their provocations capitalized on existing practices, political and aesthetic, while responding to other provocations. It was only the extreme sublimation and sedimentation of content into form that occluded the discursive prehistory of the avant-garde, and encouraged readings which focus on its conceptual and self-reflexive dimension.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> See Bürger, pp. 81-2.

## Chapter 5: The Romanian Eugen Ionescu: Dramatizing the Nation in *Nu* and *The Bald Soprano*

Before Ionescu's mischievous critical pamphlet *Nu* [No] won the Young Writers' Prize in 1934, he had been an unaccomplished writer – “an author without oeuvre” as Gelu Ionescu put it.<sup>1</sup> His 1931 poetry volume *Elegii pentru Ființe Mici* [Elegies for Small Beings] had received a cold reception and was, according to the writer's own assessment, “not good”.<sup>2</sup> *Nu*, on the other hand, secured attention and recognition, both because of and despite its scandalous stance and form. An irreverent and unconventional critical volume made up of pieces previously published in various literary reviews, it set out to expose the vanity and corruption of the Romanian literary establishment debunking its most acclaimed modernist writers and critics. It also tackled the larger issues of the specificity of Romanian culture and its standing in world literature; all this in a supremely impish manner which transgressed the conventions of critical writing.

Coffee-shop banter, prankish reversals and paradoxes, self-subversive irony, personal attacks on the looks and private lives of writers and critics, gossip and hilarious sarcasm made *Nu* an offensive if entertaining book. Many Romanian literati took it as a serious offence against the respectability of the country's letters. Its recriminating tone notwithstanding, *Nu* received a prize from those it hit the hardest. Even though the pamphlet does offer obvious insights into the shortcomings of the Romanian literary system, its critical success indicates that the literary establishment was not as corrupt and regressive as Ionescu claimed. Was it then just more of an expression of Ionescu's frustration as to his artistic failure?

This artistic frustration comes out most poignantly in the last section of *Nu*, whose dialogic title “Ladies and Gentlemen” points to the urgency of the feeling. The entire section is an exasperated address to the literary establishment and ultimately to Romania, confirming

---

<sup>1</sup> Gelu Ionescu, *Anatomia*, p. 10. Among the other recipients that year was Cioran's *Pe culmile disperării* [On the Heights of Despair]. See Matei Călinescu, *Eugène Ionescu*, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Eugène Ionescu, *Sub Semnul Întrebării* [Under Question Mark] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), p. 173. *Englezește Fără Profesor* [English Without Teacher] – the first Romanian version of *The Bald Soprano* was also written before Ionescu's departure, in the early 1940s.

Ionesco's rejection of Romanian culture so often invoked by critics. "Ladies and Gentlemen", it reads:

I blame you and your historical circumstances (people are not the product of their time, on the contrary people beget the wretched times), for all my shortcomings of intelligence, culture, intellectual feeling and genius. If I were French, I would have been maybe a genius! You are guilty for G. Ibrăileanu's lack of subtlety; for the fact that Mihail Ralea and Vladimir Streinu switched from literature to politics; that T. Maiorescu does not have an original philosophical system; that Pompiliu Constantinescu does not understand poetry one jot; for the ridiculous situation of Mr. M. Dragomirescu, who in a different country might have been a Hegel; for Fundoianu's departure abroad; that Iorga's buffoonery of interplanetary ludicrousness is taking on lofty national significance; that Mircea Eliade, nothing but a little Papini, is the leader of the generation; that P. Zarifopol had to fail because he does not have material to apply himself to; that because Arghezi was preceded by Sămănătorism, his poetry could only be what it is, i.e., Arghezian; that I. Petrovici is a philosophical monster; that E. Lovinescu could only write *The History of Romanian Civilization*; that Western Europeans think that Sofia is Romania's capital and Bucharest, the capital of Bulgaria; that the Romanians are in the tired, yet knowledgeable, yet lucid eyes of the French and the English, operetta characters. [...] In other words, I don't insist on being serious and in fact I could not be serious, since I belong, for better or for worse, to Romanian culture. Here is a first refutation, ab initio, of my seriousness. [...] I confess that I am incredibly embarrassed that I am condemned to remain a poor relative of the European intelligentsia: the fact that we are only three hundred individuals who agonize over ideas, ink and paper, and very poorly at it and that, without readers, we read each other, is one of my permanent sorrows and malaise.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, pp. 254-55.

Va acuz pe d-voastra si circumstantele d-voastra istorice (nu sunt oamenii sub vremuri, ci bietele vremuri sub om) de toate insuficientele mele de inteligenta, de cultura, de traire intelectuala, de genialitate. Daca eram francez, eram poate genial. Domniile Voastre sunteti vinovate de lipsa de subtilitate a lui G. Ibrăileanu; de faptul ca Mihail Ralea si Vladimir Streinu au parasit literatura pentru politica; de faptul ca T. Maiorescu nu are un sistem original de filosofie; de faptul ca Pompiliu Constantinescu nu pricepe o iota din poezie; de ridicolul dlui M. Dragomirescu, care in alta tara ar fi fost poate un Hegel; de plecarea peste granite a lui Fundoianu; de faptul ca bufoneria de un ridicol interplanetar a lui N. Iorga capata inalte semnificatii nationale; de faptul ca Mircea Eliade papinuta este seful generatiei; de faptul ca P. Zarifopol trebuie sa rateze pentru ca nu are material asupra caruia sa se aplice; de faptul ca, samanatorismul premergandu-l pe T. Arghezi, poezia acestuia nu a putut fi decat asa cum e, adica argheziana; de faptul ca I. Petrovici e un monstru filozofic; de faptul ca E. Lovinescu nu a putut scrie decat *Istoria Civilizatiei Romane* [...] de faptul ca occidentalii cred ca Sofia este capitala Romaniei si Bucurestii capitala Bulgariei; de faptul ca romanul este in ochii obositi, dar cunoscatori, dar lucizi ai francezului si ai englezului, un personaj de opereta.

Cu alte cuvinte nu tiu sa fiu grav si nici nu as putea, de vreme ce fac parte, de bine, de rau, din cultura romaneasca. Iata o prima infirmare, *ab initio*, a seriozitatii mele.

Va declar ca ma jeneaza incomensurabil faptul ca sunt condamnat sa raman o ruda saraca a intelectualitatii europene; faptul ca nu suntem decat trei sute de inisi care ne batem capul cu

And it continues for another twelve pages or so, packed with detailed knowledge of the Romanian cultural scene and a sharp awareness of cultural politics.

Ionesco's despair is played out at both a semantic and syntactic level. Besides the emotionally charged semantic register, the protracted catalogue of complaints about Romania is made up of no less than seventeen sub-clauses. Ionesco capsizes the common assumption that historical circumstances determine the character and condition of peoples, contending instead that the Romanians' character brought about adverse times and situations. It is as if this were a metaphysical shortcoming of the Romanian psyche. The long enumeration of critics, writers and historians who, according to Ionesco, had second-rate careers because they were born in a marginal and impoverished cultural space compound the playwright's own artistic frustrations. The implication is that however talented or endowed, these men were limited by the cultural environment.

The responsibility rested, according to Ionesco, with an uneducated and uninterested audience. Western Europe's indifference to Romania, he claims, was the proper response to the nullity of Romanian culture. Ionesco suggests that, beyond the mere backwardness of the cultural infrastructure which kept Romania isolated from the international circuit, there was a deeper debilitating dimension about the country which prompted him to wish he was French rather than in France. Mere transculturation would not have undone this almost metaphysical flaw, which equally curtailed intellectual development and the intrinsic creative value of intellectual productions. As with Romanians being perceived as operetta characters not due to Western prejudices but because they had that caricatural profile, Romanian intellectuals fell short of Western standards, the playwright believes.

Matei Calinescu has attempted to consider Ionesco's qualms about identity in a new reading of his dramatic work, suggesting that: "Eugene Ionesco's avant-gardism, so evident in his first French works, is to a certain extent related to his Romanian identity (personal-historical, as I have already mentioned), or rather, by the desire to annihilate it, not in a pathetic manner, but through laughter; destructive and purifying at the same time, and very vital, this laughter issues from French cultural sources (Jarry's Pataphysics) which he uses as

---

ideile, cerneala si hartia, si inca prost si ca, neavand cititori, ne citim intre noi insine, constituie una din tristetile, din *malaise*-urile mele permanente.



weapons against the negative myth of his father's country".<sup>4</sup> While Calinescu's reading is *prima facie* correct in mirroring closely some of Ionesco's admissions, as exemplified by my earlier quotations from *Nu*, it does not do justice to Ionesco's ambivalent engagement with different aspects of the local context and overplays the importance of French cultural sources on his aesthetics. In what follows I want to reverse this perception by also acknowledging Romanian sources and Ionesco's strong investment in the Romanian culture alongside the acerbic rejection of its political extremism.

Călinescu claims that Ionesco's most radical plays from the first French period (1950-1962) – *The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *Rhinoceros* – are the aesthetic effects of the author's rejection of his Romanian identity.<sup>5</sup> The Romanian cultural context and its prejudices, Călinescu argues, inhibited the playwright's creative potential, hence the necessity of exile. Yet, *Englezește Fără Profesor* was written in Romanian, before Ionesco's departure.<sup>6</sup> Whether the literary scene was not progressive enough to have encouraged the publication and staging of such work is another matter altogether and Paris was for sure a better platform in that respect. While Călinescu stresses Romania's cultural prejudices and the nationalist-traditionalist disposition as Ionesco's main grievances, Ionesco's address "Ladies and Gentlemen" reveals another facet of his repudiation which has to do with Romania's intellectual inadequacy. I suggest that this latter aspect of Romania's cultural shortcomings fed Ionesco's theatrical work in more complex ways than a straightforward rejection of Romanian identity would allow for. The author himself commented in *Non* on the role nationality plays in art – a very popular topic at the time – suggesting instead another aesthetic solution:

I am well aware that a nationality cannot be thrown away the way one throws away a shirt or a sock. But it can be overcome. To overcome does not mean to give up – but to contain and master. To be autochthonous only, national only, is actually to

---

<sup>4</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Eugène Ionesco*, p. 62.

As vrea sa propun aici ideea ca avangardismul lui Eugène Ionesco, atat de clar in primele sale opere franceze, tine intr-o masura si de identitatea romaneasca (istorico-personala, dupa cum am mai precizat), sau, mai degraba, de dorinta sa de a o anihila, nu in mod patetic, ci prin ras, un ras distructiv si totodata purificator, un ras foarte vital, care-si trage puterea din surse culturale franceze (patafizica jarryesca) folosite ca arme impotriva mitului negativ al tarii natalului.

<sup>5</sup> Călinescu, pp. 65-6.

<sup>6</sup> Although the exact time of its conception is still uncertain – Ionesco gave conflicting accounts – most critics agree the Romanian version was written before the playwright left Romania, probably during 1941 or 1942. See Călinescu, p. 119 and Ion Vartic "Epilog" [Epilogue], in Eugen Ionescu, *Eu [Me]* (Cluj: Echinoc, 1990), pp. 225-35 (p. 235).

wear your shirt on top of the coat. The shirt should obviously be closer to the body, to the heart, to the nation. But the shirt and the nation need to be covered. Besides, because we don't want to forget ourselves in the least bit; because we are so keen on displaying our shirts and autochthonism, the German coat is closer to us, to our skin, than the Romanian shirt. Precisely because we are so keen on our autochthonism and specificity, we are so inauthentic and unspecific. But we cannot find ourselves unless we lose ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

As opposed to my anatomical simile, Ionesco preferred a sartorial one, imagining the body as an essential and universal kernel, free of ethnicity when naked. But unabashed nakedness is an ideal state of plenitude and serenity difficult to achieve. Ionesco, furthermore, was a stylish youngster, like most Romanian intellectuals who keenly followed French fashion in both literature and clothes. He knew that showing up in the national "shirt" was an unpardonable indiscretion during the chic 1930s, the equivalent in today's social code of answering the door in one's underwear.

Ionesco's choice of garment to stand for Romanianness is derogatory in that it is associated with the embarrassment of being underdressed. The interpretation fits in with his open disavowal of Romanian culture and his feelings of shame at how Romanians were perceived by Western European eyes. The embarrassment of being underdressed (going out in "the national shirt") is conflated with the embarrassment of being Romanian when exposed to Western scrutiny. This is quite different from the bad nationalism he criticized for its intolerant and violent politics. Nationality, he claims, has to be "contained", "mastered", "overcome" like a disability (from his Romanian perspective) or a colonized subject (from the French one). If his critical prescription was in any way insightful, and I think it was, Ionesco managed to break through as a playwright of international calibre precisely because he "contained", "mastered" and "overcame" his Romanianness. As he advised, he found authenticity dialectically by overcoming the national specificity.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 192.

Stiu bine ca o natiune nu se poate azvarli cum se azvarle o camasa sau un ciorap. Dar se poate depasi. A depasi nu inseamna deloc a renunta – ci a cuprinde, a stapani. A fi numai autohton, numai national inseamna a pune, intr-adevar, deasupra hainelor camasa. Evident ca numai ceea ce este mai aproape de trup trebuie sa fie camasa; de inima, natiunea. Dar camasa si natiunea se acopera. De altfel, fiindca nu vrem sa ne uitam nici un pic; fiindca tinem asa de mult sa ne afisam comesile si autohtonismul – haina nemteasca a ajuns mai aproape de noi, de piele, decat camasa romaneasca. Numai pentru tinem asa de mult la autenticitatea si la specificitatea noastra, suntem asa de inautentici si de nespecifici. Dar nu ne putem regasi decat parasindu-ne.

In order to understand the aesthetic solution envisaged by Ionesco for Romania's identity anxieties, I will read his early pamphlet *Nu* and the articles collected in *Război cu Toată Lumea* [War Against Everybody] as records of the writer's critical engagement with the Romanian literary universe. These texts provide a useful reading key as to how this engagement might have fed his aesthetic investigations. Despite being one of Ionesco's most brilliant and revelatory texts, *Nu* has not received sufficient critical attention. Matei Călinescu and Deborah Gaensbauer offer descriptive readings of Ionesco's pamphlet as asides to his well-known theatrical work.<sup>8</sup> While they identify some central elements of Ionesco's thought, the radical playfulness of *Nu* is attributed to the author's immaturity, which seems to discourage a thorough critical engagement with the text as a standalone artefact. Ecaterina Cleynen-Serghiev's *La Jeunesse Littéraire d' Eugène Ionesco* includes a well-documented publication history of *Nu* and examines Ionesco's position on Romanian culture and its relation to the French canon.<sup>9</sup> Although she correctly places young Ionesco in the literary debates of his time, she does not fully pursue the implications of his position in relation to the theatrical oeuvre, nor the formal aspects of *Nu*. The critical pamphlet and the theatre of the absurd are two separate stages of Ionesco's artistic career, Cleynen-Serghiev contends, without recognizing that *Nu* poses aesthetic questions which are crucial for Ionesco's dramaturgy.

Gelu Ionescu's 1973 study remains the most astute reading of *Nu*, but its comprehensive scope – an exegesis of the playwright's literary beginnings in Romania – limited the study's critical ambitions. There is no attempt to read Ionesco's theatre in light of the aesthetic questions he poses in *Nu* and no detailed consideration of the book's formal aspects. Thematic readings of *Nu* are part of a larger tendency in recent studies of Ionesco. From Matei Călinescu's 1995 article, "Ionesco and *Rhinoceros*: Personal and Political Backgrounds" to other more recent investigations of Ionesco's relationship with Romanian culture, the anecdotal context of Ionesco's work has received undue if understandable attention.<sup>10</sup> The horror history of the Romanian Iron Guard and the Nazification of the Romanian intelligentsia in the 1930s of Ionesco's youthful years have seized critics' imagination, not least due to Romania's exoticized image abroad. Romania's marketable

---

<sup>8</sup> See Călinescu, *Eugène Ionesco* and Deborah B. Gaensbauer.

<sup>9</sup> Cleynen-Serghiev, *La Jeunesse Littéraire d' Eugène Ionesco*.

<sup>10</sup> See Matei Călinescu, "Ionesco and *Rhinoceros*: Personal and Political Backgrounds", *East European Politics and Societies*, 9 (1995), 393-432; and Anne Halloway Quinney.

history perhaps helped mitigate and at the same time boosted the improbable international success of an East European writer in the incredulous eyes of Western audiences and critics.

While the political background to Ionesco's coming of age had no doubt its bearing on the playwright's work, as is evidently the case with *Rhinoceros*, it also inspired, in my view, an unwarranted focus by later critics on subject matter and theme. As Susan Sontag points out, Ionesco's special merit is to have appropriated for the theatre the technical innovations of modern poetry: "the poetry of banality and meaninglessness" present in his first plays, as compared to "the oversimplified critique of modern society in *The Killer* and *Rhinoceros*". "It has been said that Ionesco's early plays are 'about' meaninglessness, or 'about' non-communication. But this misses the point that in much of modern art one can no longer really speak of subject-matter in the old sense. Rather, the subject-matter is the technique", Sontag concludes. I follow this line of argument, in claiming that his groundbreaking contribution to late modernism and theatre in general is a formal one and that facile *à clef* readings don't do justice to his complex forms. I read both Ionesco's avant-garde theatre and the highly hybrid form of *Nu* as respectively the subcategory and genre of a late modernist aesthetic which integrates both deconstructed elements of modernism ("the exasperated heightening of the modernist logic") and anticipations of postmodernism in its self-conscious avoidance of closure and radical playfulness. While it confirms Tyrus Miller's canon-setting criteria for late modernism, the singularity of an "impossible" or "dead end" form and apocalyptic apprehensiveness, *Nu* also modifies canonical assumptions by introducing to the historical-formal equation Romania's local inflections.<sup>11</sup>

In order to examine Ionesco's aesthetic roots, I use his sartorial metaphor in *Nu*, about the aesthetic dimension of national specificity, as a hermeneutic model. I am particularly interested in how Ionesco himself negotiated the relationship between his Romanian identity and modernist cosmopolitan exigencies. How did he, in other words, overcome his Romanianness in order to produce the universal form of the theatre of the absurd? To this end, I analyse *Nu*'s response to the cultural and aesthetic debates of its time and its formal enactment of these concerns. My macro-reading of form borrows from a Marxist hermeneutic lineage which approaches form as structural critique and as symptomatic of historical circumstances. I am especially indebted to Roberto Schwarz's reading of Brazilian aesthetic modernity – Machado de Assis' novelistic breakthrough on the

---

<sup>11</sup> See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: California UP, 1999), pp. 9, 13.

international literary scene – as a formal transposition of local social issues, which by way of aesthetic innovation impress Western readerships.<sup>12</sup>

My focus on form also concurs with Ionesco's own aesthetic principles. In response to accusations of formalism by the English critic Kenneth Tynan, Ionesco emphasized the importance of form:

But what is the history of art or literature if it is not, first and foremost, the history of its expression, the history of its language and idiom? For me the expression is form and content at one and the same time.<sup>13</sup>

The playwright's interest in the quality of expression and the identity of form and content, apart from being a basic modernist tenet, is also a concern which Romanian intellectuals had entertained since Maiorescu's critique of empty forms in Romanian culture.

*Nu* picks up this thread to discuss Romania's specificity in terms of an emblematic aesthetic. It was therefore important to diagnose not only what an authentic Romanian literature should be about, but also how this literature should be written in order to achieve modernity and universality. The two important tropes in Ionesco's aesthetic thought are cultural inadequacies (Romanians as "operetta characters") and the obsessive preoccupation with aesthetic authenticity ("the Romanian shirt"), which had to be overcome for Romanian writers to find that authenticity. Still, what exactly was this elusive authenticity, which, according to the playwright, was both lacking and had to be contained? What did those cultural inadequacies entail that they prevented a young Romanian author from producing work valuable in the eyes of the European intelligentsia?

"If I were French, I would have been maybe a genius!" Ionesco laments. As his interjection suggests, this was not only a question of translation, but also of translatability. Ionesco was not an accomplished author at a disadvantage due to the unfair laws of the cultural market. He was a failed writer with a less than impressive publication record even in a poor, invisible country lacking a decent cultural infrastructure. It is not clear, nevertheless, why these cultural shortcomings would prevent him from writing interesting pieces about unfortunate historical circumstances. The playwright's artistic trajectory seems to be intricately bound up with the condition of the Romanian literary space, equally absorbed by questions of aesthetic authenticity. Yet what is authentic about an underdeveloped and

---

<sup>12</sup> See Roberto Schwarz "A Brazilian Breakthrough", *New Left Review* 36 (2005), 91-107; but also Fredric Jameson's renderings of Adorno in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971).

<sup>13</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p.101.

marginal culture other than it being underdeveloped and marginal, and why would European readerships be interested in poverty and invisibility? Their indifference is already evident, Ionesco signals, in the inability to remember or imagine Romania and Romanians in any other terms than grossly caricatural ones, as “operetta characters”. Still, Ionesco managed to find that authenticity, the Romanian shirt, and present himself appropriately dressed to a Western audience despite those cultural shortcomings. How did he do it?

The answer, I suggest, is strewn in the pages of the flippant and overlooked *Nu*, which apparently jumbles aesthetic thought, literary criticism, gossip and diary entries. Notwithstanding its postmodernist jocosity and apparent flippancy, *Nu* is Ionesco’s *ars poetica*. His later numerous memoirs simply reiterate and develop the concerns, local and historical as well as existential, he dwells on, while his plays formally play out the aesthetic questions he poses in *Nu*. As Ionesco himself put it in the forward to the 1986 Gallimard Edition:

Apart from a few blunders and inconsistencies, what was said then, I continued saying and writing throughout my entire life and I would not hesitate to say again even today.<sup>14</sup>

From authenticity vis-à-vis Romanian culture but also as an existential value, to the inadequacy of expression and literature as linguistic and epistemological ossification, to sociality as a negative value and the obsessive resistance to politics or the vitiation of language for political purposes, *Nu* sets up Ionesco’s entire ontology.

The writer’s own assessment of his Romanian work stresses the importance of this book both in terms of a self-standing achievement and as an inspiration for his much-acclaimed theatrical oeuvre. He writes to Monica Lovinescu about his literary standing at the time of *The Bald Soprano*’s first editorial submission:

I was sure I had, in any case, an anti-play. I was neither naïve nor a novice. Besides, I had behind me a proper literary career: tens and tens of articles published in Romanian periodicals, a small collection of poems which were not good, and most notably, a book, *Nu* in which I was trying to blow up literary criticism. I wanted to reiterate a similar experience by blowing up theatre.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 7.

Insa pe langa stangacii si cateva incoerente, ceea ce a fost spus atunci, am continuat sa spun si sa scriu [...] de-a lungul intregii mele vietii si nu m-as da in laturi sa spun din nou si astazi.

<sup>15</sup> Ionesco, *Sub Semnul Întrebării*, p. 173.

Eram sigur ca am, in orice caz, o anti-piesa. Nu eram atunci nici naiv, nici novice. Aveam, de altfel, in urma mea un intreg trecut literar: zeci si zeci de articole publicate in periodicele

The strong emphasis in “most notably” and the fact that he used the precedent of *Nu* to model his theatrical experiments leave no doubt as to the importance of this first book for his subsequent career.

The difficulty of translating from Romanian (*Nu* has only been translated in French) and the fact that *Nu* delves into the deep and murky waters of Romanian culture and literary tradition must have been a strong disincentive. Yet it is precisely the obscure subject matter of the Romanian literary canon which makes *Nu* singularly relevant for a nuanced understanding of Ionesco’s problematic relationship with this tradition. Ionesco’s critical pamphlet is also chameleonic and challenging, playing out in formal riddles, farces and detours, content which is not discursively articulated and difficult to pin down. In this text, the playwright takes the first steps from discursive speculation on the aesthetic dimension of national identity and the cultural insecurities of young Romania, to enacting these anxieties at a formal level. Ironically, Ionesco starts finding his artistic voice while articulating his failure, his “shortcomings of intelligence, culture, intellectual feeling and genius”, as he writes in his indictment of the Romanian cultural scene.<sup>16</sup> My reading traces the topical and formal continuities between *Nu* and Ionesco’s theatre, or rather how identity concerns are enacted at the formal in a manner that anticipates the theatre of the absurd. The analysis is, however, exclusively, textual and does not engage with aspects of theatrical performance. I discuss performativity and theatricality in *Nu* as formal and conceptual foreshadowings of the absurd. In view of its radical playfulness and histrionic aesthetics *Nu* invites attention to textual performativity and formal continuities with Ionesco’s dramaturgy across the genre and medium divide.

---

romanesti, o mica culegere de poeme care nu erau bune si, mai ales, o carte, Nu, in care incercam sa arunc in aer critica. Voiam sa repet o experienta similara aruncand in aer teatrul.

<sup>16</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 254.

## 1. Translating or “Losing” Romania [content=form]

*Nu* has been described by critics as eclectic, knotty, fragmentary and, above all, artful. Marta Petreu identifies some of the genres it employs: literary criticism, cultural theory, literary pamphlet and diary.<sup>17</sup> The pamphlet puts together the broken pieces of an authorial persona mirroring its different facets and layers in an eclectic selection of genres and styles. There are pseudo-formal critical essays on Romanian modernist writers Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu and Camil Petrescu; diary entries on the writing of the critical piece on poet Ion Barbu; the anecdote about Ionesco’s literary confrontation with novelist Camil Petrescu; two contradictory reviews of Mircea Eliade’s novel *Maitreyi* in a section entitled “The Identity of the Contraries”; two sections on literary criticism and aesthetics; a tongue-in-cheek literary guide for young authors; an eclectic collection of “Ideas in the Head”; three theatrical intermezzos; “Ladies and Gentlemen” on Romania’s historical shortcomings and cultural marginality; and a melodramatic final section on death. Yet, behind this apparent eclecticism, there is a singular unity of purpose, a setting out of the different dimensions of Ionesco’s complex aesthetics: literary, cultural, political and existential.

*Nu* furthermore illustrates the author’s ideas in a stylistic tour de force with irony and deconstruction as its governing principles. *Nu*’s stylistic wit, aphoristic intricacy and structural complexity cannot be captured in the positivistic form of conventional literary exegesis – a reading it actually actively undermines. It does, however, allow a retracing of the genealogy of Ionesco’s aesthetic project in relation to Romania’s identity aporia. In characteristic avant-garde note suggested by the title, the book is an iconoclastic attack on literature understood as ossification of meaning. Its target, however, is most poignantly the Romanian literary establishment.

Ionesco exhibits a painful awareness of Romania’s marginal position in or exclusion from the international literary space dominated by France. Note the politically charged implications of Ionesco’s choice of word – “province” – which by its administrative denomination implies lack of sovereignty and political subordination.<sup>18</sup> In the context of a strong criticism of Romania’s cultural subordination to French values, this anticipates

---

<sup>17</sup> Marta Petreu, *Ionescu in Tara Tatalui* [Ionescu in the Country of the Father] (Bucharest: Polirom, 2012), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> This had been, as I have shown in the previous chapters, a recurrent criticism of Romanian culture, voiced by Benjamin Fondane and Emil Cioran among others.



Casanova's analysis of cultural geopolitics with an avant-la-lettre postcolonial twist. The terms of the critique move from older concerns (Maioreescu's and Caragiale's, in particular) about the authenticity of Romanian culture to Ionesco's preoccupation with authentic artistic expression as the aesthetic kernel of national identity.

At stake is Romania's literary reception abroad, not least because like his generational fellows, Cioran among them, Ionesco was preoccupied by Romania's cultural prestige in Europe. This is why, to Gelu Ionescu's dismay, Ionesco dismisses the whole Romanian literary canon, including its most reputable critics; because Romania's literary achievements, however spectacular locally, are irrelevant on a European scale. Ionesco interjects:

To be the greatest Romanian critic! – this would still mean being a poor relative of the European intelligentsia. What sad circumstances made for Romania's marginal cultural role (status of cultural dummy)? I will die before playing a part on the European scene which will be ruined without me!<sup>19</sup>

This is the extrinsic or the meta-reason, the contingent condition deriving from cultural power imbalances over which the Romanian intelligentsia did not have any control. Only literary exile to a more "powerful" language, as in Ionesco's case, could bypass this disadvantage. But there are also substantive intrinsic grounds on which Romanian literature could not achieve international success. "In literature and literary criticism [...], I am very tempted to only recognize Maioreescu and Eminescu", he vouches in one of the many editorials he wrote for different Romanian reviews.<sup>20</sup> Ionesco reiterates this point again and again in *Nu*, though never in such blunt terms.

There are two important problems he identifies in the state of Romanian literature. One is encapsulated in this injunction from the first section of the study on modernist poet Ion Barbu in *Nu*: "A critical neo-Junimism [from Maioreescu's cultural society *Junimea*] is needed".<sup>21</sup> Ionesco had previously published this section of *Non* as an editorial in the review *Discobolul* [The Discobole], where he explains his reasons more thoroughly:

Barely had Junimea's critic managed to establish some basic distinctions and to cut out a small well of light, and there ensued that shameful period (of which we have

---

<sup>19</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 71. Sa fii cel mai mare critic roman! – aceasta insemneaza inca sa fii o ruda saraca a intelectualitatii europene. Ce triste imprejurari au faurit Romaniei acest rol de figurant in cultura? Am sa mor fara sa fi jucat un rol pe scena europeana, care se va nimici fara ajutorul meu!

<sup>20</sup> Eugène Ionesco, II, p. 92.

<sup>21</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 57.

not entirely freed ourselves even today) which engendered the horrors of [...] Sămănătorism, etc., whereby all notions were confounded, all planes and techniques, already quite precariously clarified in the heads of the Romanian intellectuals, were mixed up.<sup>22</sup>

Here the young author refers to Maiorescu's rejection of political criteria in arts and his promotion of the autonomy of aesthetics. Throughout his career, Ionesco will remain opposed to committed literature and the encroachment of politics on art. By the same token, he was adamant both in *Nu* and in many of his Romanian articles that literature should not be recruited for nationalist purposes either in form or subject matter, as *Sămănătorism* had been in its neoromantic pastoral pieces. On the other hand, he does not approve of mediocre emulations of modern literary form: "And such is Romania's literary status: it deals with bad copies. To this day, the mistakes and memory gaps are its only original notes".<sup>23</sup> In Maiorescu's footsteps, Ionesco tackles Romania's troublesome relationship with the established Western European literary traditions, especially the French one, and the problematic balance between specific content and universal form which Romanian literature should work out in order to be noteworthy abroad.

Ionesco's position is consonant with Maiorescu's views: foreign forms are to be adopted on condition that they are properly assimilated and given a fitting content. He criticizes the two greatest Romanian modernist novelists, Camil Petrescu and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, for employing French forms without adapting them to Romanian realities: "Mrs H.P.B. does nothing other than present worn out and vaguely patched up French masks on Romanian faces."<sup>24</sup> The problem is, he contends, that: "The technique

---

<sup>22</sup> Ionesco, *Razboi*, pp. 92-3.

Abia izbutise criticul de la "Junimea" sa stabileasca unele distinctii elementare si sa-si croiasca o mica parte de lumina, si a urmat acea rusinoasa perioada (din care nu cred sa fim eliberati, cu desavarsire azi) care a dat nasterea ororilor [...] "samanatorismului", etc., in care din nou s-au confundat toate notiunile, s-au amestecat toate planurile, toate tehnicile, si asa atat de subred lamurite in capetele intelectualilor romani.

<sup>23</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 151.

Asa si situatia literara a Romaniei: repeta mai prost. Greselile si lipsurile memoriei sunt, pana astazi, singurele ei note originale.

<sup>24</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, p. 149.

Dna H.P.B. nu face decat sa repete o formula, sa prezinte mastile uzate si vag carpite ale literaturii franceze pe obraze romanesti.

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu (1876-1955) was a Romanian novelist of urban aristocratic sensibility and psychological notation in the style initiated by Proust. Her most acclaimed novel *Concert from Bach* records the existential anxieties of the fashionable society which

does not come alone; the formulas do not come empty, they are impregnated by the corresponding vision and content, Proustian, for example. And thus, Mr. Camil Petrescu pointlessly repeats the Proustian experience without any new means.”<sup>25</sup>

Ionesco applies Maiorescu’s formula of cultural critique to the micro-level of the literary text by way of a locomotive allegory:

Mr. Camil Petrescu has an excuse and a theory. He has the right and need, his highness claims (faithfully adopting Lovinescu’s theories), to employ the experience of the more advanced Western literary techniques, because it would be ridiculous to invent the bicycle after the automobile has been already invented. Apart from the confusion he borrowed ready-made from Mr. E. Lovinescu, between poetry and civilization, in this particular case it would have been clearly more interesting if he invented even now, so late, the bicycle. [...] To use his own language with all the improprieties of the analogy, Mr. Camil Petrescu can no longer, it is true, begin with the bicycle, but boards, instead, a decrepit Ford with a mascot at the wheel - the personal contribution of the Romanian writer.<sup>26</sup>

Literary critic Eugen Lovinescu, Ionesco's contemporary, was the editor of the review *Sburătorul* [The Sylph] which published and promoted Camil Petrescu and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, among other notable Romanian modernists. Unlike Maiorescu, he was in favour of cultural synchronism arguing that Romania had to emulate and adopt the forms and institutions of Western modernity in order to achieve progress. Civilizations, he contended, often evolved by way of sudden jolts forward, prompted by external influences;

---

gravitates around the organization of a private concert. This latter chronotope was probably also inspired by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Camil Petrescu (1894-1957) was similarly influenced by Proust's poetics of reminiscence but also by Andre Gide's insistence on literary authenticity. His novels – *Ultima Noapte de Dragoste*, *Intaia Noapte de Razboi* [The Last Night of Love, The First Night of War] and *Patul Lui Procrust* [The Bed of Procrustes] – take the form of collected letters, diary entries or memoranda.

See George Călinescu, *Istoria Literaturii Romane. Compendiu* and Cleynen-Serghiev, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> *Nu*, p. 101.

Tehnica nu vine singura; formulele nu vin goale, ele vin impregnate de viziunea, de continutul respective, de pilda proustian. Si astfel, d. Camil Petrescu repeta inutil, fara mijloace noi, experienta proustiana.

<sup>26</sup> *Nu*, p. 101.

Dl. Camil Petrescu are o scuza si o teorie. Are dreptul spune d-sa (adoptand, fidel, teoriile lovinesciene), si necesitatea sa utilizeze experientele tehnicei literare occidentale mai inaintate, pentru ca ar fi ridicule sa inventeze bicicleta dupa ce s-a inventat automobilul. Lasand la o parte confuzia, pe care o ia de-a gata de la d. E. Lovinescu, dintre civilizatie si poezie, in cazul de fata e clar ca era mai interesant sa descopere, chiar acum, tarziu bicicleta. [...] Ca sa ma exprim in limbajul d-sale, cu toate improprietatile analogiei, d. Camil Petrescu nu mai poate, e just, sa porneasca de la bicicleta, in schimb, se urca intr-un Ford uzat: cu o mascota la motor, aportul personal al scriitorului roman.

Romania's case was, therefore, not atypical. In the battle between the traditionalists and the moderns, which continued during Ionesco's time, Lovinescu advocated modernist urban sensibility and Western manners against the romantic idealisation of the feudal past.<sup>27</sup>

Ionesco, however, disagrees with Lovinescu's unreserved commendation of Western aesthetic modernity. Whereas this formula worked in terms of civilizational forms, Ionesco writes, it would not do in aesthetics. The forms of Western aesthetic modernity were suitable for Western historical circumstances and structures of feeling. Romania, in an altogether different spatial-temporal dimension of modernity, had other issues to contend with, which required specific forms. Hence the playwright's criticism of Petrescu's confusion between civilization and poetry taken over from Lovinescu.

The allusion is also a sting about the inanities of literary patronage. In line with Lovinescu's aesthetic theory, Camil Petrescu wrote modernist novels influenced by Marcel Proust and Andre Gide. According to modernity's paradoxical logic, however, novelty was extinguished at the moment of its emergence. When he claims that Petrescu's emulation of Proust's and Gide's forms was like driving an old Ford with a mascot at the wheel, Ionesco underscores modernity's penchant for novelty and technology, at the same time as it plays out Petrescu's confusion between civilization and poetry. The metaphor, furthermore, aptly illustrates the relationship between the West and Romania, which has been recurrently described in terms of derivativeness and backwardness. The "mascot at the wheel" is, in the same satirical vein, a measure of Petrescu's (and Romanian literature's) insignificance in comparison with Proust's (France's) modernity and momentousness. It would have been more commendable to have reinvented the novelistic bike.

If Ionesco criticized the import of outmoded modernist forms, he also disapproved of the traditionalists' Romantic *passéisme*. This was an anachronistic form, the author argued, which was neither specifically Romanian nor expressed the complex realities of Romania's fast-changing social landscape under the impact of modernization. A literature bogged down in local problems would, furthermore, never achieve universal validity in the absence of a sublimating form. The solution was, in Ionesco's view, to find a modern aesthetic in line with Western artistic developments which befitted the local content. The synthesis of local and modern/universal, thus achieved, would transcend the local.

---

<sup>27</sup> See Cleynen-Serghiev, p. 78-9.

This search for original, authentic form, or in Maiorescu's terms the identity of form and content, was tied up with and integral to the quest for an authentic Romanian identity, in the playwright's analysis:

We are asking ourselves to this day, like yesterday, and like tomorrow until the end of time, the question whether our existence is Romanian and authentic, before we even started existing in any way. The only essential thing is to exist. The whole of Alecu Russo's populist position, the problem of Romanian specificity, of the empty cultural forms, the cultural pseudomorphosis theory, of Symbolism which is the only one to express our true spirit, of pastoralism (Samanatorism) which is the only one to express our true spirit: the rural one; of Orthodoxism which is the only one to express our true spirit: the Slavic one, and other gropings, remind me of that story where one did not know whether he or his brother was alive because one of them – we don't know which one – drowned in the bathtub.<sup>28</sup>

Ionesco recapitulates the history of Romanian literature and its unsuccessful attempts to find a suitable form within the binary of traditionalism versus kitsch modernism. The aesthetic and ideological positions of different Romanian cultural groups are scornfully delineated. From Alecu Russo's and Titu Maiorescu's first critiques of Romanian culture to the Orthodoxism of the playwright's generational fellows who revindicated a Christian identity of Slavic import, this seems to have been the main preoccupation of Romanian intellectuals ever since the first stirrings of national consciousness. The excessive intellectualization of identity was more confusing than edifying, Ionesco suggests. Hence the surrealist parable about the unidentifiable dead brother which, as Matei Călinescu perceptively noted, anticipates the absurd situations and confusing dialogues of Ionesco's plays. But if one is to take on Ionesco's aesthetic inquiry, what was local content if not the rural ethos, nor the decadent sensibility of Symbolism, nor the minute interrogation of memory and subjectivity à la Proust? And what kind of form would suit this content?

In a vicious circle, the inability to find an authentic form was compounded precisely by Romania's obsessive efforts at cultural self-invention and self-engineering. As suggested by the surrealist parable about the dead brother, Ionesco believes that the neurotic

---

<sup>28</sup>*Nu*, p. 194.

Ne punem si astazi, ca si ieri, ca si maine pana la sfarsitul veacurilor, intrebarea daca existent noastra este romaneasca si autentica, inainte de a fi inceput sa existam in orice fel. Un singur lucru este esential: sa existam. Toata problema prepoporanista a lui Alecu Russo, problema specificului romanesc, a formelor goale ale culturii, teoria pseudomorfozelor culturii, a simbolismului ce reveleaza el singur adevaratul nostrum spirit: cel latin, a samanatorismului ce reveleaza el singur adevaratul nostrum spirit: cel rural, a ortodixismului ce reveleaza el singur adevaratul nostrum spirit: cel slav, si alte bajbaieli, imi aminteste povestea aceluia care nu stia daca el sau frate-sau mai e viu pentru ca unul dintre ei – nu se stie care – s-a inecat in baie.

preoccupation with identity was counterproductive. Applying the existentialist dichotomy language versus experience to Romanian culture, he argues that action, i.e., experience or art, will provide the way out of this aporia:

Because for one hundred years we kept asking ourselves how our cultural existence was going to be and we were not enlightened and we are not even close to be enlightened neither today nor tomorrow; we kept prognosticating that we should be this or that and all predictions turned out to be false, and our cultural existence is still taking place in a world of pure virtualities; because for one hundred years we haven't accomplished anything other than a discussion about our accomplishments and because all this struggle turned out to be fruitless, sterile: I beg the Romanian intellectuals to try to apply themselves to essential problems rather than to the problems of problems.<sup>29</sup>

Paradoxically though, Ionesco does not obey this injunction himself, neither in content nor in style. First, *Nu* is yet another book about Romanian literature, an instance of fruitless rumination. It is, furthermore, ironically Ionesco's personal treatise on artistic sterility, if we remember that impassioned address to a Romanian audience (the members of the prize jury, presumably) he blames for his artistic failure. Like Romanian culture, which is, according to the playwright, self-reflective to the point of neurosis, Ionesco thinks and writes himself before actually "being" artistically. Here I refer to the author's inability to find his artistic voice in Romanian and Romania (see the "bad" poems he alludes to) other than in this iconoclastic meditation on and aesthetic performance of Romania's impossible cultural position and his inopportune destiny as a Romanian writer.

Not only is Ionesco a writer manqué writing about his failure as part of a bigger national failure resulting from self-obsessed prolixity in what is ironically a (mock?) neurotic text about culture, identity and artistic voice. He is also doing stylistically in the paragraph quoted above, and many times elsewhere, what he imputes to Romanian intellectuals. The very long phrase containing multiple clauses and repetitive structures

---

<sup>29</sup> *Nu*, p. 199.

Deoarece de o sută de ani ne-am tot întrebat cum va fi existența noastră culturală și nu ne-am dumirit și nu suntem pe cale a ne dumiri încă nici astăzi, nici mâine; am tot pronosticat că trebuie să fim în cutare sau cutare fel – și toate pronosticurile s-au dovedit mincinoase, iar existența noastră culturală se află încă în lumea virtualităților pure; deoarece de o sută de ani nu am realizat nimic decât o discuție despre realizările noastre și deoarece toate aceste zăbateri s-au dovedit infructuoase, sterile: implor pe intelectualii români să încerce să se devoteze problemelor esențiale, iar nu problemelor problemelor.

enjoined by semicolons, the semantic prolixity of the multiple clauses, the protracted rhythm re-enact ironically Romania's uncontrolled babble about itself. In other words, Ionesco gives artistic form to the Romanian identity neurosis in what can be read as a textual (modernist) performance of that existential crisis. In giving a befitting form to a very local content, the young author makes one step towards the resolution of the national aesthetic/ identity problem he is posing in *Nu*. In the end, what all Romanian intellectuals had in common is precisely the neurotic search for an identity which refuses to yield, the protracted writings of what should be and who one is.

This conclusion haunts the subtext of the histrionic *Nu* and fosters a possible answer as to how the Romanian identity aporia is reflected by Ionesco's theatre in the terms of his own questions and criticism. As he purports, this has been the favourite content of Romanian culture:

To this day, the most important work of the young generation has been the discussion about the most important work of the young generation. The same as the most important achievement of the one hundred years of Romanian gropings is the discussion about the most important achievement of the one hundred years of Romanian gropings.<sup>30</sup>

What was missing was an aesthetic to incorporate this content. *Nu* is both caught up in this identity deadlock – being a book on that same topic – and it gestures towards an aesthetic relief for this aporia. A successful aesthetic transposition of the sterile “discussion” Ionesco indicts would break the ruminative vicious circle as well as provide that much sought-after authenticity. Romania's cultural specificity consists precisely in the neurotic self-consciousness and excessive preoccupation with authenticity and identity. In the manner of a postmodernist riddle, *Nu* offers the answer encrypted in the question, its form aping all the while the identity neurosis it criticizes.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Nu*, p. 196.

Pana astazi, opera cea mai insemnata a tinerii generatii a fost discutia asupra operei celei mai inseminate a tinerei generatii. Dupa cum realizarea cea mai insemnata a celor o suta de ani de dibuire romaneasca o constituie, tot asa, discutia despre realizarea cea mai insemnata a celor o suta de ani de dibuire romaneasca.

## 2. Prefigurations of the Absurd in *Nu*

The acute self-reflexivity of Romanian culture – its preoccupation with “the problem of problems” – perhaps informed Ionesco’s own meta-artistic endeavours in his theatre. In “The Tragedy of Language”, he describes *The Bald Soprano* as “a comedy of comedies”.<sup>31</sup> *Nu* is in fact entirely dedicated to meta-problems: Romania’s literary status on the European scene, the function of criticism and literature, metaphysical considerations on human nature. Alongside such stylistic impersonations of the nationalist bubble as in the prolix passage quoted above, Ionesco peppers *Nu* with satirical performances of the authorial voice, the writer manqué, thus illustrating how national and personal identity are intimately connected to style.

After the long indictment of Romania’s unfortunate circumstances, in “Ladies and Gentlemen” Ionesco turns to farcical introspection:

I am fed up, I am up to here with myself. For how much longer shall I admire myself, pamper myself, complain, observe myself, cognize, recognize and over-cognize myself in all the mirrors, in all the skies, in all the waters, in all the stars? For how much longer shall I chase myself like a wooden horse chases a wooden horse and even if I catch myself, only catch myself in order to punch myself?<sup>32</sup>

Note the ironic parallel between national self-invention (the writing of the nation) and Romania’s ambition to match the prestige of the great European cultures on the one hand, and the author’s personal drama, on the other. Ionesco’s laments about his obsessive “soul-searching” mirror Romania’s gropings for an authentic identity. And it is literature, which in both cases follows the sinuous ramblings of identity and carries the false hope of deliverance. The young author is fed up with literature as much as he is fed up with himself because, he contends, they are both inextricably linked in the nightmarish search for an elusive identity.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> *Nu*, p. 258.

M-am saturat, sunt plin pana in gat de mine insumi. Pana cand sa ma tot admir, sa ma tot dezmierd, sa ma tot plang, sa ma tot observ, sa ma tot cunosc, recunosc si paracunosc in toate oglinzile, in toate cerurile, in toate apele, in toate stelele? Pana cand sa tot alerg dupa mine insumi ca un cal de lemn dupa un cal de lemn si, daca ma prind chiar, sa nu ma prind decat ca sa ma pocnesc?



Ionesco's textual self-invention – *Nu* functions as a portrait book and an ars poetica at the same time as it forcibly introduces Ionesco to the Romanian literary scene – echoes Romania's literary invention. The authorial *I* chases himself much like Romanian culture. The text pursues a slippery identity in repetitions, synonyms and redundancies, creating a delicious linguistic spectacle in the manner of a slapstick scene of mayhem and hopelessness. In this national versus personal equation, the irony puts some distance between Ionesco and Romania but not quite. Both the young author and Romania are caught up in the dialectics of the text that establishes an unusual correspondence between identity and aesthetics. The textual jerks and pirouettes stage a frantic chase for identity within the thickets of the text – a formal strategy that also drives Ionesco's theatre.

Whereas in the first sections of *Nu* the focus rests on a topical level, in the latter chapters the problems signalled beforehand in a descriptive fashion are performed in the style, they become pure style. At the same time as it perfectly captures Romania's predicament, the passage is evocative of the discursive bubble and existential impasse in which Ionesco's characters are perpetually lost. Ionesco's plays are similarly invested in formal exercises that challenge the audience to fathom a dreamlike content which is ubiquitous yet elusive. In anticipation of the agonizing dialogues of his plays, *Nu* performs aesthetically the Romanian identity neurosis.

Alongside the observations on the shortcomings and failures of Romanian culture, the playwright performs stylistically the national faults and peculiarities as well as the personal qualms in a postmodernist free-for-all, without clearly marking the boundaries between cultural/literary criticism and personal confession, banter or gossip, scholarly endeavour and fiction or play, identity and group, I and them. The double negation – Ionesco is both a nonwriter (unpublished author) and a nonperson (Romanian) – gives him ample space to stage this histrionic identity. *Nu*'s authorial persona plays up the personal against the cultural and impersonates the clownish character the Romanian appears to be in the eyes of civilized Europe, tortured by self-consciousness and shame:

How to redeem myself? I am torn up (*t-o-r-n u-p*) by all vanities, all ambitions. I suffer incommensurably because I am not Europe's greatest poet, the greatest critic in the world, the stoutest lad in Romania, and not even a prince.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> *Nu*, p. 84.

Cum sa ma purific? Sunt sfasiat (*sfa-si-at*) de toate vanitatile, de toate ambitiile. Sufar incomensurabil ca nu sunt cel mai mare poet al Europei, cel mai mare critic universal, cel mai voinic ins din Romania si, macar, print.

By self-parodying his own ambitions, which in turn mirror Romania's cultural ambitions and its efforts at self-invention, Ionesco delivers a critique of national identity. He makes that clear in his address to the readers: "In other words, I don't insist on being serious and in fact I could not be serious, since I belong, for better or for worse to the Romanian culture. Here is a first refutation, *ab initio*, of my seriousness."<sup>34</sup> The state of Romanian culture was so bad, that is, it could not be taken seriously. The caricatural identity Ionesco performs is, therefore, both internalization and subversion of this stigma through play. To the extent that inventing Romania was mostly a literary project, the young author satirizes its constructedness and neurotic self-absorption. As literature and life overlap indiscriminately in the making of identity, literature and culture acquire existential connotations. More than just an aesthetic statement as to the nature of art and its conceptual dead ends, Ionesco's critique exposes the constructedness of both personal and national identity, invested so much in literary and cultural issues. That *Nu* oscillates in what seems to be haphazard fashion between the very concrete, if often hilarious, issues of Romanian culture to metaphysical considerations on the relationship between life and literature, attests to the complex correspondences and exchanges between literature and identity.

"Intermezzo No. 1", for example, effects one of the many histrionic transitions from the national to the personal so prevalent in *Nu*. The subtitle of the section "No Apparent Connection with the Text" functions as a reading prompt for the piece or a stage direction, signalling thus its dramatic disposition. Borrowed from the performative arts where it serves the same periphrastic function, the title itself – intermezzo – invites the theatrical analogy. What the piece stages is an aesthetic performance of the literary constructedness of the self and its entanglement with language. There is no I outside the letter I:

*I. Who is this I? And what is who? Poor, stupid, dear I: no matter how I would be, I would still love myself. I, who now sits and writes, who fell in love with Miss So and So, who, an hour ago, an hour (stressed), talked to Paul Costin Deleanu, the young philosopher, as it were, the young philosopher, who would fall if he stumbled and who does not fall when he does not stumble. Why? (to the power [of] four).*

Decidedly, I cannot get over this: my name is Eugen Ionescu (E-u-gen-io-nes-cu), I am "23 years"\* old (why am I 23 years old?), I move, have hiccups, read, eat, think! think! how I think in front of the curtain! And I am turning slowly on my right foot, and I am very smart.

---

<sup>34</sup> *Nu*, p. 254.

*I, I shout: I, and I hit my chest with my fist. I have a slightly thick nose, I hold it between my fingers, I move it to the left, to the right, to the left, to the right.* <sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Nu*, p. 177.

*Eu.* Cine e asta eu? Si ce e cine? Saracul, prostul, dragul *eu: cum eram, tot ma iubeam.*

*Eu*, care acum sade si scrie, care s-a indragostit de domnisoara Cutare, care, acum un ceas, un ceas (apasat), un ceas, a discutat cu Paul Costin Deleanu, junele filozof, ma rog, junele filozof, si care ar cadea daca s-ar impiedica, si care nu cade cand nu se impiedica. De ce? (La puterea [a] patra).

Hotarat nu pot trece peste asta: ma numesc Eugen Ionescu (E-u-gen-io-nes-cu), am "23 ani" (de ce am 23 de ani?), ma misc, sughit, citesc, mananc, gandesc! gandesc! cum gandesc in fata perdelei! si ma intorc incet, pe piciorul drept, si sunt tare destept.

*Eu*, strig: *eu*, si-mi dau un pumn in piept. Am un nas cam gros, il tin intre degete, il misc la stanga, la dreapta, la stanga, la dreapta.

Intermezzo nr. 1  
(Fără legătură aparentă cu textul)

Deschid gura: „a” – și mă mir, „ris” și-mi vine să râd, „to” și pufnesc în răs, „te” și casc ochii, și pe urmă, fiindcă așa vreau eu: „les”. Și a ieșit A-ris-to-te-les.

Dar dacă spuneam O-bo-bo sau O-bi-bi nu ieșea nimic: pentru că nu am vrut, de la început.

\*

*Eu.* Cine e ăsta eu? Și ce e *cine*? Săracul, prostul, dragul *eu: cum eram, tot mă iubeam.*

\*

*Eu,* care acum șade și scrie, care s-a îndrăgostit de domnișoara Cutare, care, acum un ceas, un ceas, (apăsă) un ceas, a discutat cu Paul Costin Deleanu, junele filozof, mă rog, junele filozof, și care ar cădea dacă s-ar împiedica, și care nu cade când nu se împiedică.

De ce? (La puterea [a] patra.)

Hotărât, nu pot trece peste asta: mă numesc Eugen Ionescu (E-u-gen-io-nes-cu), am „23 ani”<sup>\*</sup> (de ce am 23 de ani?), mă mișc, sughit, citesc, mănânc, gândesc! gândesc! cum gândesc în fața perdelei! și mă întorc încet, pe piciorul drept, și sunt tare deștept.

---

\* 1933, primăvara (*n.a.*).

Figure 8: Eugène Ionesco, *Nu* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011), facsimile 1.

\*

*Eu*, strig: *eu*, și-mi dau un pumn în piept. Am un nas cam gros, îl țin între degete, îl mișc la stânga, la dreapta, la stânga, la dreapta.

*Eu*, ăsta, *eu*, pot face aproximativ ce vreau: să merg într-un picior, să nu merg într-un picior, să casc, să nu casc, să cred în Dumnezeu, să nu cred în Dumnezeu, să învăț carte și să declam, cu drăgălășenie: A-ris-to-te-les.

\*

Dumnezeu, o! Dumnezeu! iată o vorbă pe care am auzit-o de la nea Georgică și o spun și eu, toată ziua, ca prostul, fără să știu ce înseamnă, fără să știu ce înseamnă a însemna, ce înseamnă să însemne a însemna ș.a.m.d. până în pânzele albe. (Pânzele albe sunt niște pânze foarte albe.)

\*

Eu am obiceiuri!  
O-bi-ce-iuri!  
Obicei-uri!  
O-biceiuri!  
Obice-iuri!

\*

Să iei ceva de la altul. Altul să ia ceva de la tine. Să numești brânza – „Brânză”, să numești bastonul – „Baston”: o dată pentru totdeauna.

Și nu viceversa.

În felul ăsta a ieșit civilizația și teoria cunoașterii.

Figure 9: Eugène Ionesco, *Nu*, facsimile 2.

Well in advance of Beckett's deconstructive operations in *The Unnameable*, Ionesco probes the linguistic dimensions of the self. Besides the syntactic and typographic innovations evident in the print facsimiles in Figure 8, this deconstructive game is also very theatrical in its use of punctuation and emotive notations. The paratextual props – diction suggestions and modifications of font – envisage a performance as well as a reading of the text.

Ionesco's textual entrapment is too much like Romania's ruminative neurosis to be just a personal idiosyncrasy. *Nu* itself reinforces this mirroring process by way of its unsettling changes of registers between the personal and the national. If in *Nu* even the most formally challenging parts remain comfortably rooted in the topical discursiveness of the adjoining sections which function as reading keys, the theatre plays out this identity crisis to its logical extreme, whereby abstract characters are utterly lost in a self-referential linguistic space, their speech either redundant or incomprehensible.

### **3. From Play to Plays: *Englezește Fără Profesor***

*Englezește Fără Profesor* is the first version of the anti-play *La Cantatrice Chauve* [translated in English as *The Bald Soprano* or *The Bald Prima Donna*].<sup>36</sup> This was eight years before the first staging of *La Cantatrice Chauve* by Theatre de Noctambules in Paris, which made Ionesco one of the most famous playwrights of the century. Apart from the adaptation of Romanian puns and language games to the exigencies of the French language, Matei Călinescu argues, the French play includes modifications that give the piece more coherence and memorability.<sup>37</sup> However, the aesthetic principles, the characters, the structure and most of the content are the same, the differences being only marginal. *Englezește Fără Profesor* can, therefore, be justly considered Ionesco's aesthetic breakthrough.

As the “anti-play” denomination suggests, the piece undermines all theatrical conventions in a plotless nonsensical charade with lunatic characters. In a domestic bourgeois setting, the first act presents the resident couple verbalizing their extremely prosaic existence. Mr and Mrs Smith list the contents and quality of the dinner they have just eaten, and comment on each other's and their children's behaviour during dinner. The

---

<sup>36</sup> See Matei Călinescu, *Eugène Ionesco*, p. 119.

<sup>37</sup> See Matei Călinescu, *Eugène Ionesco*, pp. 122-130, for a detailed discussion of the differences between *Englezește Fără Profesor* and *La Cantatrice*.

redundant descriptive utterances replace the usual dramatic dialogues which would set up the plot in traditional theatre. The dialogue then goes into nonsensical exchanges about the health benefits of yogurt, the competence of doctors which depends on their willingness to die with their patients, the social events section in the local newspaper and most importantly, a perplexing conversation about an extended family (three generations) who are all called Bobby Watson, irrespective of gender. As expected, the superfluity makes identification and reference impossible. This makes the protagonists fly into a rage but their spirits are just as easily restored.

The second act confronts the audience with the Smiths' guests – apparently they are going to have a second dinner – Mr and Mrs Martin. These turn out to be unidentifiable amnesic characters that retell their journeys to London and their recent activities without being able to recognize each other. The scene follows them painfully working their way through to some sort of self-recognition, to the heuristic conclusion that they are a couple and they have kids together. In the end, though, the mock Sherlock Holmes maid Mary rebuts the whole hypothesis on the basis that the colour of their children's eyes does not match. Contrary to their belief, it turns out that Donald Martin is not Donald Martin and Elisabeth Martin is not Elisabeth Martin. They are not the parents of the same children, therefore not husband and wife. Their true identity is, nevertheless, not revealed.

The meeting between the Smiths and the Martins occurs in the third act which, in view of the more numerous company, occasions an increasingly disarticulated exchange which culminates in cacophonous mayhem. The protagonists end up shouting at each other random words and inarticulate sounds in what appears to be an apocalyptic confrontation. The serving of the dinner, however, unexpectedly saves the situation and they all regain their bourgeois composure and manners. Whereas *The Bald Soprano* goes for a circular ending which repeats the beginning of the first act but with the Martins as protagonists instead, *Englezește Fără Profesor* has a more provocative finale, reminiscent of the Dadaist and Surrealist performances. Dissatisfied with the play, the audience take to the stage in a violent riot. The police intervene with machineguns and after the agitators are shot, order is restored.

Because *Englezește Fără Profesor* has not been translated, critics who cannot read Romanian don't have access to the play and have tended to minimize its role in anticipating *La Cantatrice Chauve*. Romanian critics, on the other hand, Matei Călinescu points out, are

impelled to exaggerate its merits.<sup>38</sup> But even Romanian critics don't go much beyond linking Ionesco's "tragedy of language" – the degeneration of meaning – to Caragiale's critique of empty bourgeois phraseology. Ion Vartic, for example, reads the play as a deconstruction of analytic theatre, the static drama focused on the past and based on hermeneutic reminiscence, whose prototype is *Oedipus King*.<sup>39</sup> Most critics explain the aesthetic innovations in *The Bald Soprano* by reference to Ionesco's own confession. In "The Tragedy of Language", the playwright writes that he was inspired by the Assimil English learning method. The dialogues employed by the manual communicated "wise and elementary truths" which when put together revealed the vacuity of meaning the playwright dramatized in his theatre of the absurd.<sup>40</sup> Ionesco, however, does not mention the Romanian version of the play and he dates his experience with the Assimil Manual in 1948, the year of *The Bald Soprano*'s conception.

The disintegration of meaning had been, before *Englezește Fără Profesor*, an important motive in *Nu*. The pamphlet actually articulates most of the play's concerns: from theatricality and meta-critique (its paradoxical nature), "the collapse of reality" and meaning under the pressure of the literary, to the radical interrogation of identity.<sup>41</sup> The play's employment of redundant speech and identity lapses could also be read as a parody or aesthetic figuration of the Romanian identity drama. "The fish was fresh. I smacked my lips. I had two helpings. No, three. It makes me go out. You also had three helpings but the third time you had a smaller portion and I had a big helping the third time, as well", Mrs Smith says in the first act of *Englezește Fără Profesor*.<sup>42</sup> The redundancy and performativity of the language echo Ionesco's deconstructive games in *Nu*. The fact that the characters' discourse and rumination take the place of action harks back to Ionesco's critique of Romania's inability to exist, its entrapment in a ruminative vicious circle.

Identity also figures predominantly in the play as unstable, problematic and dangerously affixed to a slippery, disintegrating language which refuses denomination. First there is the incident with the multiple Bobby Watsons who cannot be told apart because they are called the same. This absurd situation brings to mind Ionesco's sarcastic comment that

---

<sup>38</sup> Călinescu, *Eugène Ionesco*, p. 119.

<sup>39</sup> See Vartic, p. 233 and Gelu Ionescu "Prolog".

<sup>40</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p.179.

<sup>41</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 179.

<sup>42</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Eu [Me]* (Cluj: Echinoc, 1990), p. 207.



Romania's confusion about its aesthetic specificity reminded him of the story of the two brothers of which one was dead but nobody, including the survivor, knew which one of them. Then, there is the Martins' amnesia and their mock-syllogistic reconstruction of their personal histories.

Elements of Ionesco's cultural critique in *Nu* – particularly his indictment of Romania's excessive rumination on identity to the detriment of action/existence – resurface in the disarticulate struggle of the Smiths and the Martins. The existentialist categories (the dichotomy existence versus thought/speech/literature) the author applied to the analysis of Romanian culture come back as identity issues in his theatre. *Nu* documents by way of its ideas and style the genesis of an aesthetics that becomes fully manifest in his theatre. It contains *in noce* the aesthetic formula which, purged of its contextual baggage, made Ionesco famous in France. His theatre dramatizes an identity impasse that, severed from its initial context, Western audiences read as a metaphysical human condition. In this light, Ionesco's dramaturgy can also be read as local content contained and mastered in the universal form of the theatre of the absurd.

A comparative reading of *Englezește Fără Profesor* and *La Cantatrice Chauve* reveals that all references to Romania have been purged from the latter play. The Romanian yogurt maker Popescu Rosenfeld becomes the Bulgarian Popochef Rosenfeld, while the ending is rewritten to exclude the incantation of the Romanian name Andrei Marin and the shooting of the audience in defence of the theatre as a national institution. This was part of Ionesco's strategy to dissociate his work from the Romanian context. Matei Călinescu notes that the exclusion of the local references in the French play is in line with its apolitical and ahistorical logic that would more easily evince universal readings.<sup>43</sup> *La Cantatrice Chauve* is thus more abstract, more disembodied and more abstruse in the absence of an exegetic context we still have recourse to in *Nu*, and more open to metaphysical readings and universal identifications.

The French play, nevertheless, delivers its critique of nationalism in an oblique, underhand manner in the way it sets up its opening scene. Quite apart from *The Bald Soprano*'s alleged inspiration from the formulaic method of the English manual, the fact that the expository stage direction repeats the word English sixteen times for no other reason than emphasis must be digging at something more than the triteness of language manuals. The ethnic qualifier "English" is incongruously affixed to "evening", "fire", "silence" or

---

<sup>43</sup> Călinescu, *Eugène Ionesco*, p. 128.

“stroke”, among other things. This incongruence is meant for the reader rather than the audience, since these elements of the direction cannot be represented on stage unless an actor reads them aloud:

A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair, wearing English slippers, smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire, He is wearing English spectacles and a small grey English moustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes.<sup>44</sup>

The hilarious insistence on an ontologically untenable ethnic specificity can be read as a dig at Romania’s obsessive preoccupation with authenticity.

Moreover, in *Nu* Ionesco excoriates the nationalist appropriation of culture in similar terms:

After all, culture means for us: the history of French, German, English, Italian (and so on and so forth) literatures, philosophies, sciences, problems etc. Literature, philosophy, science etc., are not Romanian, but French, German, English, Italian, etc. When we make culture, we cannot be Romanian from the very beginning, but a bit English, French, etc.<sup>45</sup>

As with the setting of *The Bald Soprano*, what should be contingent or inconsequential is absurdly construed as essential. The young Ionesco rectifies this ontological confusion when he exasperatedly admonishes in *Nu*:

I cannot be surprised enough by how intransigently we insist on our authenticity, even more so than on being poets, novelists, philosophers, doctors, mathematicians and other vegetables, when we claim to be concerned, when we make and we obey first of all, poetry, novels, philosophy, medicine, mathematics and other vegetables. I suppose every English poet, for example, is English. Still, he is first of all poet and then English.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Four Plays*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Ionesco, *Nu*, pp. 151-2.

In definitiv, cultura inseamna pentru noi: istoria literaturilor, filozofilor, stiintelor, problemelor etc. ...franceze, germane, engleze, italiene, s.a.m.d. Literatura, filozofia, stiinta, etc. nu sunt romanesti, ci frantuzesti, nemtesti, englezesti, etc. Cand facem cultura, nu putem fi romani de la inceput, ci putin englezi, francezi etc.

<sup>46</sup>*Nu*, p. 191.

Nu pot sa ma mir indeajuns de ce tinem cu atata intransigenta la autohtonismul nostru mai inainte de-a fi poeti, romancieri, filosofi, doctori, matematicieni si alte zarzavaturi, cand ne declaram preocupati, cand facem si ne supunem, in primul rand poeziei, romanului, filsofiei, medicinei, matematicilor si altor zarzavagerii. Presupun ca orice poet, de pilda englez, este englez. Dar e in primul rand poet si in al doilea rand englez.

The precedence of the nationalist criteria in Romanian culture that the playwright criticizes in the pamphlet is translated in *The Bald Soprano* as an epistemological “nationalization” of the universe, so that the absurdity of such political projects becomes obvious by way of exaggeration, in the manner of caricature. And yet, despite all admonitions and satire, Ionesco himself advocated aesthetic specificity in his critique of what he deemed to be derivative in Romanian modernism, and was equally enthralled by authenticity.

#### **4. Authenticity vs. Theatricality**

A popular concept of existentialist thought, authenticity was not only an obsessive preoccupation for Romanian literati in search of national identity, it was also an important category in Ionesco’s ontology as delineated in *Nu*. Besides its cultural aspects which Ionesco discusses in relation to Romanian identity, authenticity is the corollary of the playwright’s aesthetics and metaphysics. That Ionesco is preoccupied by authenticity as much as the fellow Romanian writers he castigates in *Nu*, is yet another irony which reflects on the complexities of identity.

In his reading of Arghezi’s poetry, Ionesco writes about inauthenticity as simulation or lack of genuine poetic feeling, but also as technical flaw:

Simulation itself is, therefore, only important for the poet’s conscience, if this can be a problem of conscience. What is important, though, is the evidence of simulation, the impression of simulation, which is the bad technique of “the white thread” (Romanian idiomatic expression meaning “easily seen through”): because the technique, extrinsic to emotion, needs to submit to emotion, and not to free itself from emotion. It has to be the wife of emotion in as far as the marriage between technique and emotion is possible. Simulation, when obvious in the aesthetic body, constitutes an infringement of internal order, a confusion of levels.<sup>47</sup>

In Ionesco’s aesthetic vision, poetry and art are authentic only to the extent they express “a physiological easing off of emotion”.<sup>48</sup> Pure poetry and art are ends in themselves, whereas rhetorics and discursiveness (prose) are means towards an intended (ideological) end. His

---

<sup>47</sup> *Nu*, p. 19.

Actiunea simulării nu are importanta deci decat pentru constiinta poetului, daca aceasta poate fi o problema de constiinta, dar prezinta importanta evidenta simulării, impresia de simulare, adica tehnica proasta a atei albe: pentru ca tehnica, exterioara emotiei, trebuie sa se supuna emotiei, iar nusa se elibereze de emotie. Ea trebuie sa fie sotia emotiei, pe cat este cu putinta mariajul dintre tehnica si emotie. Simularea, cand este evidenta in organismul estetic apare ca o contrazicere a ordinii interne; ca o incalcare de planuri.

<sup>48</sup> *Nu*, p. 21.

thesis is directed against a sort of literary emptiness in texts disconnected from lived existence, a lack of substance manifest in empty images and disarticulated words. His favourite choice of word is “disintegration”, which suggests a falling apart between form and content inherent to inauthenticity. The terms of the dichotomy proliferate and take on more meanings until they reach ontological dimensions.

Ionesco sums up his reading of Arghezi by opposing “the authentic” – understood as “substance or content” – to the “facile”:

What is facile is external, technical, rhetorical, superficial and false. [...] On a different level, facile is cliché, prose, convention (even thinking is convention – Durkheim claims – abstract ready-made formulation: what I take from the social and is not my own auroral individual knowledge).<sup>49</sup>

The playwright’s gloss points to the double-edged epistemological implications of aesthetics, which can on the one hand, in its experimental instances, function as a heuristic method, and on the other as mystification by way of fossilized forms. Literature can be both an instrument of knowledge in the guise of poetry, which entails innovation, and an ideological tool by virtue of its social and political character. Due to their reliance on rhetorics, which smothers the lyrical intuition of the aesthetic, Romanticism and theatre are, in Ionesco’s view, the most contaminated forms. Theatricality, furthermore, features in his close readings of Arghezi’s poems as a negative formal attribute, as the encroachment of rhetorics over the poetic, and therefore the epitome of inauthenticity. This explains why Ionesco decided to “blow up” literature from its inauthentic stronghold – the theatre.

Yet while indicting theatricality, *Nu* is markedly theatrical. The pamphlet incorporates “stage directions” as to how the text is to be read. Parodic indications accompany Ionesco’s stylistic pirouettes. A diary entry records the author’s anxieties about death, which give a different perspective to his critical engagement with the poet Ion Barbu: “(To be read in a gaudy, dramatic, distraught tone and with teary hiccups.) I cannot stand so much fear! So much fear, so much fear, so much fear! etc., etc.”<sup>50</sup> Ionesco’s disillusion with

---

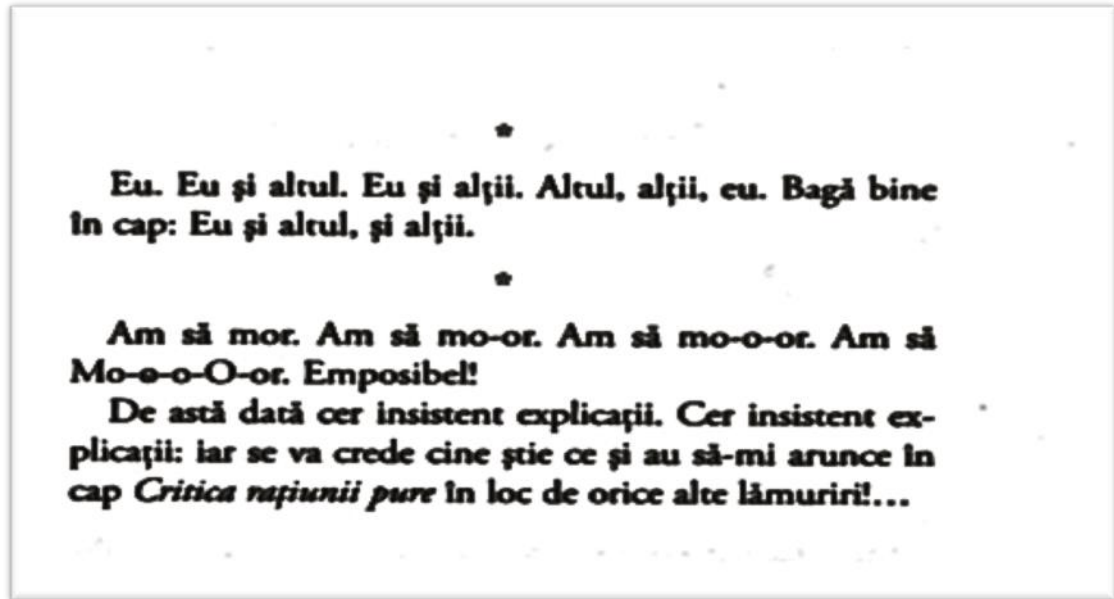
<sup>49</sup> *Nu*, pp. 52-3.

Ce este facil e exterior, tehnic, rhetoric, superficial si fals. [...] De pe alt plan, facil inseamna cliseu, proza, conventie (chiar si gandirea este conventionala – afirma Durkheim, formulare abstracta de-a gata: ceea ce am din social si ceea ce nu este cunoastere individuala, proprie, aurorala.

<sup>50</sup> *Nu*, p. 86.

(A se citi cu un ton trenar, dramatic, acablat si sughitandu-se cu lacrimi.) “Nu mai pot indura atata frica! Atata frica, atata frica, atata frica! etc., etc.”

literature is highlighted by way of performative props: “Listen to this confession (Oh! Oh! no solemnity, no tragedy): the books I write about are indifferent to me, if they don’t profoundly repugn me. Profoundly.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise, “Intermezzo No.1” ends on a mock-hysterical note: “I will die. I will di-ie. I will di-i-ie. I will Di-i-i-I-ie. Emposibel.”<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 10:** Eugène Ionesco, *Nu*, facsimile 3.

Particularly theatrical are the three intermezzos which differ from the rest of the text, as they would on stage, through an excess of topical and stylistic licentiousness by way of which they function as powerful aesthetic elucidations of the book’s main arguments. Moreover, *Nu*’s spectacular rhetorics and anecdotal verve make for a shrewd self-subverting performance of authorship. By adopting and exaggerating the poses and attitudes it indicts, Ionesco implodes the genre from inside, an aesthetic manoeuvre which dovetails with his aesthetic vision.

Ionesco also denounces theatricality as a metaphysical and social flaw – the encroachment of the literary over existence. In the section “Anecdotă Literară sau Mult

---

<sup>51</sup>*Nu*, p. 147.

Ascultati on marturisire (O! O! fara solemnitate, fara tragedie!); cartile despre care scriu imi sunt indiferente, in cazul cand nu imi repugna profund. Profund.

<sup>52</sup> *Nu*, p. 179. Please note the innovative use of orthography for theatrical effect.

Am sa mor. Am sa mo-or. Am sa mo-o-or. Am sa Mo-o-o-O-or. Emposibel.” Please note the innovative use of orthography for theatrical effect.

Zgomot pentru Nimic” [Literary Anecdote or Much Ado About Nothing ], which recounts a wrangle with the fellow writer Camil Petrescu whose work he had trashed in the previous section, Ionesco depicts the Romanian literary world as a closed in, self-contained and self-referential bubble completely disconnected from reality. The section builds up an entire literary cosmology made up of literary politics, literary deaths, literary friends, literary seasons, literary insults, literary friendships and literary cafés, literary brothers and literary morals, literary persons, literary knowledge, literary scandal, literary forces and literary existences. This is a microcosm which converges into the bigger picture of Romania as a literary province with its own literary time (a lot behind the literary Greenwich) and a cartography apart (its literary neighbours are Latvia and Lapland, Ionesco complains). Instead of a means to express knowledge and emotion, literature turns in on itself and becomes a seedless husk which passes on its artificiality and inauthenticity to language and life, consuming them from inside.

Confronted with an emotional situation – he is facing Camil Petrescu’s disappointment with the harshness of his critique – the autobiographical Ionesco discovers literature has engulfed the physical world, it does not exist outside literature. Unable to hang on to something “real”, authentic, he feels utterly lost:

Communication is no longer possible between literary people since language, which connects other people, isolates, nullifies them. I was actually only able to genuinely communicate to people who are not concerned with literature, who are not stale and dead. For what pained me that obscure evening, I would have found (they were handy) plenty of phrases, *tourneures* and even quotations from famous texts. I could not find anything appropriate, nothing relevant, nothing proper, nothing unliterary [...]. I am shaking/ rocking so badly, of course, because I don’t have any stable reference point, any star, any light, any safeguard, any certainty. I am not even thoroughly convinced that I don’t have any convictions and that there are not convictions to be had. I am standing like this, ridiculous and sad, rocking to the right and to the left, back and front.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> *Nu*, pp. 124-5.

Intre oamenii de literatura nu mai e posibila nici o comuniune, caci limbajul, mijloc de apropiere la ceilalti oameni, pe ei ii desparte, ii neutralizeaza. Am putut comunica veritabil, de altfel, numai cu oamenii care nu fac literatura, care nu s-au imbacsit sau neutralizat. Pentru ceea ce ma durea in acea seara obscura, in acel birou friguros, as fi gasit (erau la indemana) o sumedenie de fraze, *tourneures* si chiar citate din texte celebre. Nu gaseam nimic potrivit, nimic la locul lui, nimic propriu, nimic neliterar. [...]Ma clatin asa tare, desigur, pentru ca nu am nici macar un punct fix de reper, nici o stea, nici un far, nici o siguranta, nici o certitudine. Nu am nici macar convingerea deplina ca nu am si ca nu pot exista convingeri. Stau asa suspendat si caraghios si trist, balanganindu-ma in dreapta si in stanga, in fata si inapoi.

What Ionesco describes is the crisis of modernity, an unwholesomeness that has been variously described as disenchantment by Max Weber, alienation by Karl Marx and sentimentality by Friedrich Schiller. In contradistinction Ionesco believes that humanity, engulfed by literariness, can no longer access the “living and changing reality” and is experiencing epistemological vertigo.<sup>54</sup>

The author’s dystopian vision echoes the playwright’s statement about the genesis of *The Bald Soprano*. The dialogues and characters he picked up from the conversation manual became unhinged. “For me what had happened was a kind of collapse of reality. The words had turned into sounding shells devoid of meaning; the characters too, of course, had been emptied of psychology”, Ionesco writes.<sup>55</sup> Yet the identity crisis dramatized by his theatre is experienced most intensely by Ionesco as a young Romanian writer and by Romania which is, as the playwright explains, an essentially imaginary place, its identity over-reliant on self-definition and literature. His self-portrayal, rocking desolately in a void of “self-hood” after discovering there is no more than a collection of references to famous texts he has access to, epitomizes his characters’ struggle to hold on to meaning and identity, to “exist”. A sort of physical paralysis induced by excessive literariness and self-consciousness prevents Ionesco, his characters and Romania from breaking free and being.

If incapable of breaking the spell, *Nu* thinks through the existential impasse and posits solutions:

And how can we “be”? Getting out of the maternal cabbage, taking a step, a pirouette, screaming, holding our noses and saying “Good Afternoon”! If we continue to haggle, we need to postpone our birth with “250 years, three months and fifteen days”, according to my astrological calculations. We cannot overcome our vacillation by thinking (for God’s sake! We have been doing this for a century) because on the contrary, we are wavering because we are too ruminative. In order to emerge out of nothingness one does not need a discourse, but a scream, a bewildered gaze; we manifest our existence not by way of a discourse on existence, but by stretching our hands towards apples or stars.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 101

<sup>55</sup> *Notes*, p. 179.

<sup>56</sup> *Nu*, p. 195.

Si cum putem “fi”? Iesind din varza materna, facand un pas, facand o pirueta, urland, tinandu-ne de nas si zicand “Buna ziua”! Daca continuam sa ne tocmim trebuie sa ne amanam nasterea cu “250 de ani, 3 luni si 15 zile”, dupa calculele mele astrologice.

Iesirea din indoiala nu se face cugetand (pentru Dumnezeu! facem de un secol aceasta experienta) pentru ca, dimpotriva, ne indoim pentru ca suntem cam prea foarte cugetatori. Iesirea din neant nu se face printr-un discurs, ci printr-un tipat sau printr-o privire mirata; ne

This is the drama of Ionesco's protagonists, their inability to "be" other than through the disarticulated language they emit like broken toys. Both *Englezește Fără Profesor* and *The Bald Soprano* are static and self-referential, the characters afflicted by an existential paralysis of the sort Ionesco experienced during the critical debate with novelist Camil Petrescu. Language, ransacked by the alienating effects of the literary, refuses to conjure reality or self-hood. The protagonists attempt unsuccessfully to reclaim communication but language traps them again and again. In the end they are left just with letters and inarticulate sounds.

The final scene of *Englezește Fără Profesor* (which was not kept in *La Cantatrice*) is particularly telling as to how Ionesco's play reflects on national issues. Enraged by the suspicious lack of action on the stage - the actors have retired, nothing is happening - the audience takes to the stage, at which point the perpetrators are machine-gunned. The police inspector, the gendarmes and the theatre director congregate on the stage, congratulate each other for the job, and start admonishing the survivors for having attended the play. When a member of the public points out that theatre needs an audience, the police inspector retorts:

How do you dare talk when I am quiet, you impertinent fool? (Towards the entire audience): You watch it, you hooligans, you temper yourselves, this should teach you a lesson! (He is pointing to the bodies on the stage): The same can happen to you. (Towards the audience): I will know how to defend the noblest national cultural institution, the theatre, this temple for actresses! Get out! I don't want to see you here again!<sup>57</sup>

It would be easy to read this again for its anecdotal value, as a historical reference to the radicalization of Romanian nationalism in the vein of *Rhinoceros*. But I want to suggest a more complex and nuanced reading, as an allegory about the Romanian aesthetic debates which make the point of Ionesco's cultural analysis in *Nu*. On the one hand, the bourgeois protagonists lost in the thickets of a disarticulate speech (what Maiorescu branded

---

vadim existenta nu printr-un discurs asupra existentei, ci [prin] intinderea mainii catre mere sau stele.

<sup>57</sup> Ionescu, *Eu*, p. 233.

Cum indraznesti sa vorbesti cand eu tac, obraznicule? (*Catre toata sala*): Derbedeilor, sa va astamparati, sa va bagati mainile in cap, sa va fie invatatura de minte! (*Arata cadavrele de pe scena*): Cum au patit astia, asa puteti sa patiti si voi. (*Catre Sala*): Voi sti sa apar cea mai nobila institutie de cultura nationala, teatrul, acest templu de actrite. Dreepti! Iesiti afara! Sa nu va mai prind aici!



“inebriation with words”) make up the tragicomedy of national self-definition, while the police defends the nonsensical play as the revered product of the national theatre. As Martin Puchner showed, in view of its participative/collaborative nature theatre is a predilect medium for projects, like those of national theatres, which seek to coalesce politics and aesthetics.<sup>58</sup> Because of its political implications for the nation-building process, Ionesco had yet another reason to choose to undermine this particular genre.

## 5. Conclusion

*Nu* attempts both personal and national redemption, showing how the two dimensions were inextricably linked. Ionesco’s critical mission to find a way out of Romania’s incapacitating rumination about itself by way of, in the vein of that same tradition, more national self-pondering coincides with an aesthetic one, of overcoming his writer’s block. By virtue of being a Romanian writer, Ionesco is caught up in this conundrum first by being part of that same aesthetic malaise and second by sharing in the debilitating national insecurities. The lack of visibility outside the insignificant, limited ambit of the national canon is a strong inhibiting factor. Ionesco’s artistic impasse – encapsulated in the tautological logic of “I cannot write because they won’t read me” – mirrors the paralysing insecurities which afflicted Romanian literature.

Apart from the strong refutation of Romania’s literary tradition, *Nu* registers Ionesco’s attachment to this culture and the role it played in the shaping of his aesthetics. His search for an original and audible artistic voice mirrors Romania’s quest for a cultural identity comparable to the “great” European cultures. Maiorescu’s cultural criticism, both directly and by way of Caragiale’s theatre, finds expression in Ionesco’s oeuvre which dramatizes “empty cultural forms” or its variant, “the inebriation with words”. While Maiorescu’s critique and Caragiale’s plays expose the incongruence between Oriental ethos and Western cultural forms in Romanian society, the vacuity of political phraseology and ultimately the political contamination of language and the ensuing epistemological impasse, Ionesco continues this process by transposing (or “sedimenting”, to use Adorno’s phrase) all content in form.<sup>59</sup> Ionesco’s modernist sensibility mutates Maiorescu’s and Caragiale’s

---

<sup>58</sup> Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright*, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984).

concerns to the aesthetic level. In *Nu* he discusses the mismatch between the form and content of Romanian modernism and links this to an ontological problem regarding Romania's identity.

The self-reflexivity entailed by Romania's preoccupation with "the problems of problems", in Ionesco's words, is furthermore continuous with the aesthetic recipe of Ionesco's meta-theatre. That Romanian literature finds its authentic voice, the identity of form and content in the disarticulated speech of Ionesco's characters is deeply ironic. The Ionesco character made up of language only and lost in absurd linguistic games is no longer specifically Romanian, but lends itself to universal interpretations as a portrayal of metaphysically and epistemologically dysfunctional humanity. The very local issues present in *Nu* which are lost in his later writings, because no longer relevant in the French context, are embedded in a theatrical aesthetics which dramatizes Romania's "empty forms" and identity qualms as an existential crisis.

The fact that Ionesco then relativizes the whole problem of Romanian identity by postulating a metaphysical incongruence between form and content ("How would I believe in the old heresy of the identity between form and content?") and an axiomatic scepticism ("Although, even if Western values are necessarily superior to the Romanian ones, I admit that I am entirely suspicious of any human values.") is little consolation to the young Romanian author.<sup>60</sup> This is Ionesco's convenient escape from history into transcendence. Romania's cultural marginality fades away from the superior vantage point of a metaphysics of insignificance and absurdity. If the aesthetic solution to the Romanian identity aporia is the disarticulated speech of his theatre, the philosophical one is the existentialist paradigm.

Moreover, Romanian concerns concurred with a generalized identity crisis (of values and expression) in old Europe, which is what gave Ionesco the modernity/modernness (in the non-historical sense) needed for the local to acquire universal value. Ionesco thus found dialectically the essence of "Romanianness" and overcame or contained it at the same time, by transposing it in a form – the theatre of the absurd – which presents its "operetta characters" as rootless subjects of modernity, unrecognizably Romanian, as Ionesco thought civilized Europe would imagine them.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Nu*, pp. 187, 233.

Desi, chiar daca sunt valorile occidentale inevitabil superioare celor romanesti, marturiesc ca ma indoiesc integral de orice valori umane.  
Cum sa cred in vechea erezie a expresiei identice cu continutul?

In the exercise of canonizing the theatre of the absurd despite the alleged individualism and originality of the authors banded together under the genre, Martin Esslin refers to the loss of values and certitudes, whether religious, political or cultural, brought about by World War II, which Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov and Genet alike, problematize. Esslin adduces Camus's definition of the absurd as a humanity in "irremediable exile, because he [it] is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity."<sup>61</sup> Apart from the fact that ironically three of the four authors listed by Esslin lived and wrote in exile in Paris and that the metaphysical condition Camus described is very much grounded in a historical context which engulfed Romania, the perpetual homelessness and incongruity pertaining to the absurd is also part and parcel of the Romanian history and identity, as Ionesco points out in *Nu*. Romania as a "nonplace" and "nonidentity" was an apposite allegory for the late modernist metaphysics of alienation.<sup>62</sup> In a historical paradox the divergent chronologies of periphery and centre concur in a point where the past is the future. The identity qualms of a young/unformed culture coincided with the anxieties of the old European culture in decline, thus bringing about the reconciliation of Romanian sensibility with its desirable aesthetic other.

---

<sup>61</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Myth de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p.18, quoted in Esslin, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> I borrow here from Terry Eagleton's description of Ireland in "Nationalism, Irony and Commitment", in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said: *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 35.

## Conclusion: Identity Neurosis, Irony and Modernity

In a psychoanalytic reading of nationalism, Julia Kristeva suggests that the repression of roots is as expressive of self-hatred as chauvinism. Psychoanalysis, she writes, encourages the return to origins “in order to better transcend them”.<sup>1</sup> Kristeva’s proposition is reminiscent of Eugène Ionesco’s aesthetic injunction and underlines the importance of a middle-ground position between the extremes of chauvinism and cosmopolitanism. Even though it is undermined both by its excesses and its detractions, nationality is still a concept which impacts significantly individual identities. I have tried in this thesis to read Tristan Tzara’s and Ionesco’s avant-garde forms in the context of Romania’s cultural and literary traditions.

What are the sources of Romanian absurdism? It would be an overstatement to suggest that absurdism, either in its Dadaist or theatre of the absurd forms, originated in Romania. Nevertheless, by way of Tzara’s and Ionesco’s innovative work, it made an important contribution to the European avant-garde. Although the Romanian genealogy of the absurd has been sketched in several studies which consider the continuities between Ionesco and Caragiale, on the one hand, and Tzara and the Romanian avant-garde, on the other, a thorough engagement with the specific issues of Romanian modernity which fed into these aesthetic manifestations has been lacking. This thesis reads the aesthetic of the absurd as representation, response and enactment of the complicated narrative of Romanian modernity and its identity anxieties. Its main concerns are Romania’s problematic invention occasioned by the traumatic intersection of East and West, its resistant cultural hybridity, its cultural dependency on France, its self-doubts and its anti-modernity reactions. All of these issues are reflected, as I have shown, in the debates and aesthetic preoccupations which determined the shape of Romanian modernism. I have suggested that the neo-colonial anxieties and the paradoxes of Romanian modernity could only be expressed aesthetically by way of “absurdism” – a style which evolved from Maiorescu’s and Caragiale’s biting irony to the radical nonsense of the reviews edited by Tzara and of Ionesco’s pamphlet.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), p. 4.

What emerges from this revisitation of Romanian aesthetic modernity are continuities hitherto ignored between *Junimea*, Caragiale and Ionesco in terms of a critique of Romanian culture which employs similar conceptual and stylistic tools. Tzara's Dadaist forms, on the other hand, appear to have recruited the subversive strategies of the modernist left which prompted the aesthetic mutation at work in Romanian symbolism. In view of the historical peculiarities and the artists' own concerns, I have given particular attention to the cultural transactions between Romania and France. The cultural dependency, which so troubled Romanian identity formations either in its political or aesthetic manifestations, was turned on its head, redirected and undercut by Tzara's and Ionesco's forms. The Romanian modernist left's anti-bourgeois catchy rhetoric and satire contaminated the exhausted absurdist Symbolism of young Tzara and projected it forward from imitative anachronism to precocious avant-garde. Ionesco, similarly lost among the different local adaptations of French modernism, intercepted Caragiale's critical theatre and pushed it towards a local instantiation of radical modernism.

These artistic journeys dispute canonical understanding of modernism's dynamic as centre-periphery diffusion. While Romanian modernism does engage and is shaped to a large extent in relation to Western modernity, the interaction is not in any way unidirectional nor always mimetic. A deeply rooted ambivalence informs most of the cultural exchanges, as well as Romania's attempts to define itself as a cultural entity at the crossroads between Europe and the Balkans. The aesthetic of the absurd is in this respect an articulation of Romania's split identity and an aesthetic closure for its identity anxieties.

As is evident from the entry on Romanian literature he wrote for the *Encyclopédie Clarté* (1955), Ionesco was aware that the ambivalent attachment to Western Europe, and France in particular, determined the evolution of modern Romanian literature. His comments flash, on the one hand, the strong connection between the identity and aesthetics I have pursued in this thesis, and the playwright's own ambivalence towards Romania, on the other:

This excessive suspicion, justified by past historical circumstances, will constitute, as we shall see later, one of the vices, an obsessive neurosis, of a whole literature which at the same time refuses and yields to the dialogue with the great civilisations, at the same time thirsty for knowledge, wishing the changes while repelling them : the too intense contact, the too strong influences of European literatures, will they not smother the original identity of what is Romanian ?

And later:

It's always the same dialectic of refusal and acceptance, the same dramatic dialogue so typical of this nascent Romanian culture which felt the need to be both aware and part of the movement of universal civilization without losing in the process its 'original soul', which it nevertheless could not apprehend before finding its own literary expression.<sup>2</sup>

Finding a specific literary expression was Romania's neurotic obsession. Caught between the drive for originality and the impossibility of avoiding the overwhelming spectrum of Western modernity, Romania was writing itself under the spell of this obsession. Its obsession proved, in the end, to be productive. Tzara's and Ionesco's forms achieved that synthesis between local and universal the latter commended.

The playwright wrote this lucid analysis twenty years after *Nu*, when his plays were already convulsing the Parisian stages and he was no longer the frustrated young Romanian author. The dramatic change of tone, from the frantic rebuttal in *Nu* to this composed acceptance of Romania's history, was granted by the hindsight of exile and success. The text was meant, it is true, for a different purpose and addressed to a different kind of audience. If in *Nu* Ionesco washed his laundry in the familiar company of the Romanian literati while also scandalizing them into acknowledgement, the encyclopaedia entry is a deferential presentation to French readers unfamiliar with Romanian literature. This positive and balanced approach made sense on a number of levels in terms of his PR. However hard he might have tried, the playwright could have not completely disassociated himself from Romania. By excoriating it, the way he had done in *Nu*, he would have done himself a disservice both by extension and by displaying unnecessary iniquity.

Yet I believe the change of perspective was genuine, as witnessed by the conciliatory statements Ionesco made in his French articles collected in *Antidotes* where he

---

<sup>2</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Littérature Roumaine*, pp. 28, 35.

Cette méfiance excessive que les situations historiques antérieures font comprendre, constituera pourtant, comme nous le verrons par la suite, un des vices, une névrose obsessionnelle de toute une littérature qui a la fois s'offre et se refuse au dialogue avec les grandes civilisations, à la fois assoiffée de connaître, voulant les échanges tout en les repoussant : le contact trop vif, les influences trop puissantes des littératures européennes n'étoufferont-elle pas la personnalité originaire de ce qui est roumain ?

C'est toujours la même dialectique de refus et d'acceptation, le même dialogue dramatique si caractéristique de cette culture roumaine naissante qui sentait, à la fois, le besoin de prendre connaissance, de s'intégrer dans le courant de la civilisation universelle sans pour cela perdre son « âme originelle », dont on ne pouvait, pourtant, savoir ce qu'elle était avant qu'elle n'ait trouvé son expression littéraire propre.

declares his sympathy with the politically oppressed Eastern European intelligentsia.<sup>3</sup> His disappointment with the cultural climate in France, particularly with left-wing activism and opposition to French imperialism among the elites after the Second World War, made him identify nostalgically with the Romanian (and other Eastern Bloc) dissidents who now shared his conservative humanist values. By dint of Romania's absorption into the Soviet Bloc, history reunited Ionesco with his fellow countrymen. Yet another paradox, the playwright evinced subversive difference from Romania during his early years and nostalgic identity from the distance of exile. Ionesco's ambivalence illustrates the vicissitudes of an identity which Romanian modernism was at pains to fathom and articulate.

The dialectic of acceptance and refusal Ionesco writes about is a quandary at the core of Romanian identity, not only because of its historical circumstances (the consecutive invasions and the subsequent xenophobia) as important as those are, but because Romania as a state and cultural identity was a product of Western modernity while at the same time insisting on its local specificity and self-sufficiency. The further paradox is that those standards of specificity and self-sufficiency were themselves concepts taken over from German and French cultural nationalism. To put it simply, Romania ceased to be its elusive "self" – that which patriotic intellectuals equated with a traditional local community – at the precise moment it became a nation-state. A Western modern political form, the nation-state replaced the old imperial structures of external rule which did not entail the strong correlation between culture, identity and politics the idea of nationality demanded, nor the subsequent self-consciousness. This foundational aporia is imbricated in the dialectical dynamic of modernism: on the one hand the reactionary impulse to return to an idealized past, on the other, the compulsive attraction to modernity's dazzling vertigo.

The aesthetic questions Ionesco posed in *Nu* exhibit the dialectic of acceptance and refusal and obsessive neurosis he attributes to Romania. The nebulous solutions he proposed – that Romania should emulate the West but not too much and it should be authentic without obsessing about authenticity – are steeped in this ambivalence. Likewise, Ionesco harshly criticized the obsessive preoccupation with national authenticity at the same time as he put metaphysical and aesthetic authenticity at the core of his aesthetic investigations. All this precisely because of the intractability of the foundational aporia he describes: that Romanian culture could not find its specificity (content) unless it found its expression (form) and it

---

<sup>3</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Antidotes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

could not come up with an appropriate form if it did not determine its specific content. Ionesco's aesthetics was successful in its synthesis of national and modern/universal, not because it solved this aporia but because he embraced its intractability and represented it as such, as a perpetual struggle with identity and the semiotic difficulties it engenders. He thus brought Romania's search for a suitable form to a successful closure.

Yet, the playwright's concerns about the unity of form and content and the aesthetic inflection of identity are a long thread running through Romanian aesthetic modernity, as his comments indicate. In his theatre, Ionesco continues Maiorescu's critique and transposes the crux of Caragiale's theatre – linguistic alienation/empty forms as epistemological crisis – into a formal device. The incongruity of form and content manifest in Romanian culture – the mismatch between Western institutions and local realities – challenged Romanian modernism to find appropriate forms. Maiorescu's sardonic and irreverent criticism, Caragiale's journalistic satires and burlesque plays, the lampoons and manifestos of the Romanian modernist Left and Ionesco's pamphlet and theatre are all articulations of this cultural and aesthetic aporia. A back and forth dialogue resonates in their work.

Caragiale dramatized Maiorescu's "empty forms" in the misappropriated and misspelled neologisms employed by his characters and in the ridiculous impersonations of French liberal ideology or bourgeois domestic scandal which constitute the plots of his plays. His theatre anticipated the absurdity of Ionesco's aesthetics. Caragiale's critique of kitsch and his subversive use of mass media forms – his anti-paper *The Capon* and the satirical employment of advertisement, telegram and minutes forms – contaminated the Symbolist sensibility of Tzara's fellow writers and complemented their radical politics. Even though strangely absent from Ionesco's review of Romanian modernism, the Dadaist precedent undergirds *Nu*'s subversive stance on the Romanian literary establishment, literature and literary criticism. The meta-critical dimension of the theatre of the absurd, as well as its aesthetic strategies, are congeneric with the Dadaist project.

Out of these reverberations and continuities emerges a different story of Romanian modernism, more dynamic, more engaged and more coherent. Modernism's concerns are both confirmed and modified by Romania's different experience of modernity. The differences and similarities invite reassessments and reconsiderations of the canonical paradigm. In Romania, the reactions against modernity characteristic of modernism at large were consubstantial with a resistance to Western forms and influences, as Ionesco notes. There, modernism's dynamic took (as in other countries of similar circumstances) this



specific form of tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, between form and content. The trajectory of Romanian culture was determined by imitations, rejections and various negotiations of Western modernity. Romania had to find its cultural coordinates between the past of its Ottoman legacy and the future of Western modernity, and determine a specific present (modernity). The clash between modernity and tradition was, therefore, aggravated by conflicting civilizational paradigms, by the violent encounter between East and West.

Modernity's antinomies were, furthermore, amplified because they were embedded in the very structure of the Romanian state which aspired to catch up with the political and technological developments at the same time as it insisted on preserving its cultural heritage profoundly invested in a feudal lifestyle. The initial opening up to Western forms which triggered the formation of the nation-state, resulted in an incongruous melange of cultures, constituencies, geographies and temporalities. The resistance of the local, inherently hybrid, culture to the homogenizing drive of the nation-state came out in a pathology of anomalies and malformations. The disparities manifest in the body of the nation – the incongruent juxtaposition of urban and rural landscapes and constituencies, of modern extravagance and feudal penury – elicited strong criticism and opposition to further change. Titu Maiorescu's critique of "empty forms" was part of that reaction and the attempt to find forms, either political or aesthetic, to accommodate local realities. But modernity's march forward made the task impossible. Between the Ottoman/Balkan past and the Western future, there was no place where Romania could be invented from scratch. Romanian modernity was therefore cut out by the permanent clash and negotiation of its conflicting allegiances.

Jagged temporality and cultural disparity make up, according to Fredric Jameson, the existential equation in which the various modernisms emerged in an unevenly developed Europe up until the end of World War II. Contrary to historical stereotypes which identify high modernism with the technologically advanced metropolis, Jameson describes modernism as a culture of incomplete modernization with all the attendant tensions and ambivalences.<sup>4</sup> Romanian modernism is, in this respect, not atypical, but on the contrary,

---

<sup>4</sup> See Fredric Jameson "The End of Temporality", *Critical Inquiry*, 29 (2003), 695-718 (p. 699) and *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991); and Andreas Huyssen.

because so dramatically torn by the processes of modernity, so tortured by its tensions, an epitome. Out of these tensions emerged aesthetic articulations which concurred with the modernist innovative tenets. The paradoxes, inconsistencies, mistranslations and spill-overs of Romanian modernity challenged coherence and discursiveness and stretched the limits of expression.

Whereas Romania's case confirms modernism's antithetical and fractured disposition, it also adds new dimensions and configurations. Uneven development and ambivalence towards modernity were further compounded by self-doubts and cultural dependencies typical of a postcolonial identity. *Junimea's* strong refutation of the liberals' Francophone progressive ambitions, on the one hand, and the clash between Iorga's *Sămănătorul* group and the modernist Left, on the other, are part of this contestational dynamic which recruited aesthetic as well as ideological weapons. The push and pull of these competing drives was not uniform, nor easily discernible. Maiorescu and Caragiale repudiated Francophone modernity as well as the nationalist claims on literature, despite their conservative political allegiance. What unified their vision was perhaps an elitist resistance to mass democracy in its nationalist populist manifestation, mass media and kitsch (the encroachment of popular culture). Their critique was inflected by the antagonism between high and low culture which took a particular turn in Romania.

Oddly enough, both nationalism and Francophilia were associated with the fickleness and ineptitude of the newly emerging bourgeoisie which were emulating French nationalism. Similarly, Tzara and Ionesco had a bone or two to pick with the middle-class mind-set, the first from a left-wing ideological vantage point, the other continuing the conservative legacy of Maiorescu and Caragiale. The reactions against cultural modernity, against mass culture and mass politics came from opposite ideological poles. Conservative elitist ideas fed both Maiorescu's critique of incompetent journalism and its empty phraseology, and Caragiale's aversion towards mass media, democracy, and the attendant politicization of language and kitsch. Ionesco inherited this suspicion towards politics and dramatized in his theatre the ossification of meaning, the absurdity of bourgeois domesticity and the mass totalitarianism it galvanized. He also took over Caragiale's scorn for kitsch which in his plays reaches metaphysical dimensions.

Tzara's magazines, like Caragiale's, appropriated the strategies and resources of mass media to formulate a left-wing critique of nationalism and bourgeois values and a project of political emancipation through art. From both positions, the conservatism of Maiorescu, Caragiale and Ionesco's on the one hand, and Tzara's and the modernist Left's progressive agenda, on the other, emanates *kulturpessimismus*, the battle between high and mass culture, only briefly pacified in the avant-garde aesthetic project.<sup>5</sup> Both the conservative and left-wing attacks on modernity were directed towards the shortcomings and failures of the liberal-capitalist system, which in Romania were aggravated by inappropriate assimilation, mistranslations, local resistance, insecurities, excesses and identity qualms fuelled by a superimposed tension between the indigenous culture and Western ideas and institutions. As I showed in Chapter 4, the Romanian avant-garde not only responded to a modernist compulsion for novelty and shock, as is usually believed, but also to political pressures and a desire to formulate a viable political and aesthetic modernity. In this light, the avant-garde was resisting historical modernity, as much as conservative modernists like Caragiale and Maiorescu, or desperate modernists like Ionescu did.

What this different contextualization of Dada aesthetics emphasizes is its oppositional nature, its anti-art, anti-nationalist, anti-bourgeois political agenda, without necessarily confirming a radical discontinuity with the *l'art pour l'art* of Symbolism, but rather a *détournement* of its aesthetic resources. The fact that both Romanian reactionaries and progressives are modernists (as is confirmed by the variegated allegiances of canonical modernist writers) endorses a polarized understanding of modernism which is often overlooked for the purpose of streamlined conceptualization. The critical and formal continuities across the ideological divides of Romanian modernism signal common concerns which have been so far ignored or downplayed. The radical irony and absurdism running through these different manifestations of aesthetic modernity articulate the paradoxes, inconsistencies and aberrations of an identity in crisis. The *histoire croisée* of Romanian modernism mutated the terms and aesthetic coordinates of borrowed forms in a multidirectional transcultural exchange generative of new expressions.<sup>6</sup> The battle between

---

<sup>5</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 124 and Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). Despite his affinities with Mounier's personalist left, Ionesco remained throughout his life suspicious of politics. His political ideas as expressed in *Antidotes* are nevertheless very close to Maiorescu and Caragiale's conservatism.

<sup>6</sup> The term borrowed from social scientists Michael Werner and Benedicte Zimmermann is used to describe modernity's uneven temporalities by Bahun, and Peter Brooker "General

the ancients and the moderns, the clash between tradition and modernity, high and low culture, took specific Romanian shapes in a continuous multi-layered, if oblique dialogue with Western modernity on the one hand, and with France's cultural domination, on the other. After emulating and regurgitating Western forms, Tzara and Ionesco delivered Romania's contribution, its response and reinterpretation of modernity's challenges.

### **Irony and Identity**

I want to close by attempting to consider irony's potential to alleviate the conflicts and paradoxes of Romanian modernity. By tracing the origins of Romanian absurdism in *zeflemea*, I have shown that irony was one of its essential ingredients. Absurdism, as opposed to *zeflemea*, mutates the mechanics of irony to the macro level of form where it performs a meta-critical function. At the topical level irony projects meaning in between the opposites of statement and intention, and therefore redefines it in dynamic, dialogical terms. It is, in other words, a movement or a relationship, rather than a result. Absurdism similarly dislocates monolithic lexemes arranged in syntactic order thus forcing new dynamic meanings from the unexpected and unregulated reconfigurations. The resulting defamiliarization triggers not only reconsideration and new meaning-making processes, but also a critical awareness of what has been taken for granted before, naturalized.

Most importantly, both irony and absurdism rely on disjunction as signification mechanism. A third, composite, hybrid, and indeterminate signified emerges in between the irreconcilable terms of the ironic equation. What one means negates what one says, but what one means is not what one means because if that were the case, one would just say it. So what one means is something else which one cannot say otherwise, because it eludes both conceptualization and discursiveness. What one says has to remain unnamed in order to be named. As Paul de Man put it, "Curiously enough, it seems to be only in describing a mode of language which does not mean what it says that one can actually say what one means."<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, is the formula of Ionesco's aesthetic recipe for the writing of Romania.

---

Introduction", *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Volume III, Europe 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 1-24.

<sup>7</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 211.

Romania is defined by an absence and the attendant desperate, unsuccessful attempt to fill that absence. Tzara's Dadaist nonsense, on the other hand, disrupts the logic of bourgeois chauvinism both by lexical transgression (profanities and insult) and by syntactic subversion. Beyond its negating value – the refutation of compromised ideologies – the Dadaist nonsense exudes a poetics of humour, interrogation and renewal, it perceives the world with a new language. But Ionesco's and Tzara's radical refashioning of language and style in their avant-garde forms has roots in an ironic mode which marked Romania's aesthetic modernity.

The dynamic of the lineage, as this revisitation of Romanian modernism shows, is incremental and oblique. If a random juxtaposition of texts will not reveal obvious continuities, the narratives, dialogues and encounters I have traced, describe illuminating patterns. I am not claiming that these are the only significant patterns, nor do I attempt to erase other accounts. The aim of this thesis is just to complement and complicate previous accounts. Maiorescu, Caragiale, Tzara and Ionescu employed irony in different ways to signal the problems of a national culture in the making. From Maiorescu's and his peers' *zeflemea* – condescending banter from the position of a superior, Western self towards a local messiness and hybridity that Caragiale describes as an infested body groomed according to the latest Parisian fashion – to the corrosive lampoons of the left wing press which informed Tzara's Dadaist style and finally to Ionesco's sarcastic indictment of the Romanian literary establishment in *Nu* and the subversive parody of theatrical conventions, there emerges a critical tradition which capitalizes heavily on irony and satire in all their forms, as both tropes and aesthetic modes. The Romanian aesthetic radicalism – Absurd Romania – responded to these aggravations and excesses, to the political pressures characteristic of a young nation and to the problematic relationship with an internalized superior Western other.

Irony is of course not a Romanian invention, but an emanation of Western modernity, so intricately linked to it that Ernst Behler could confidently write: "Irony is inseparable from the evolution of the modern consciousness".<sup>8</sup> Both modernist artists and critics of modernism confirm this postulation. The modern concept of irony as formulated by Schlegel and Baudelaire articulates the modernist tension between sensibilities and

---

<sup>8</sup> Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), pp. 73, 75.

temporalities which could no longer be reconciled nor kept tidily apart, a self-critical awareness of the inadequacy of the self in the modern world and the attendant endeavour to transcend it that becomes manifest in style. It also dramatizes a split in the self, a loss of unity and wholeness engendered by historical modernity. Satire, likewise, is an oppositional aesthetic which was appropriated both by antimodernist resistance and the emancipatory drives of modernism.

Yet Romanian employments of irony and satire have a corrosive, self-destructive edge which signal deeper clefts than the typical shifts of modernity allow for. The aggravations, complications and variances of Romania's experiences of modernity, as I have shown, have to do with the internalization of the superior Western other and the clash of two different civilizational paradigms. The ensuing hybridity and conflicted identities were perceived as anomalous and incongruous. The emotional investments of the self-mirroring process, the shame resulting from self-awareness made articulations of this split identity more violent. It is this violence that prompted Caragiale's description of the nation's body as grotesque and Ionesco's embarrassment that the sophisticated West perceived Romanians as burlesque characters. Irony negotiated then this distance, which both eased and aggravated the shame.

In his emblematic essay on irony – “De l'essence du rire” – Baudelaire differentiates between different types of humour and their underlying psychic structures. He writes of “excess” as the essential ingredient of the grotesque or what he calls “le comique absolue” and concludes that, because of “their dislike of all extremes”, this type of humour features relatively rarely in French art.<sup>9</sup> Romania was, on the contrary, aesthetically at ease in the hyperbolic mode of the grotesque which accommodated the disparities, paradoxes and hybridity of Romanian culture. Irony was not only well suited to aesthetically modulate the paradoxes of Romanian modernity – as I have shown, more poignant than in the West – it also befitted the articulation of Romania's split identity, troubled beyond the typically modern alienated consciousness fallen from the organic wholeness of pre-modern times. It enacted the tension between a local/ empirical self and the ironic self-critical one which tried to prescribe or negotiate a desirable identity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “On the Essence of Laughter”, in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. by P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), (140-161) p. 154.

Baudelaire's striking proposition that "the distinguishing mark of this type of comic was violence", only becomes clear when corroborated with the colonial scenario he chooses in order to illustrate his point. The poet ascribes the ironic mode to ultra-civilized nations as a decadent side effect and professes that, on the contrary, the primitive sensibilities of the colonized West Indies – as illustrated by de Saint-Pierre's heroine Virginie – are naively incapable of irony. He also understands the ironic mode as critical distance between civilization and nature – wherefrom man can do violence to himself by condescending laughter. De Man identifies this split or *dédoublement* as the key concept of Baudelaire's essay and underscores the ironic nature of the semiotic self. But he chooses to downplay Baudelaire's superiority/inferiority or master/slave dynamic "with all the implications of will to power, of violence, and possession which come into play when a person is laughing at someone else – including the will to educate and to improve". De Man contends that the self-duplication involved in irony "merely designates *the distance* constitutive of all acts of reflection."<sup>10</sup> In so doing, he belies the attention to the political dimensions of the semiotic self, delineated by Baudelaire. Baudelaire's association of irony and political repression/abuse foreshadows the postcolonial concept of discursive hybridity. The colonial subject is, according to Homi Bhabha, "double-voiced", ironically poised between clashing discursive formations, the dominant and the repressed.<sup>11</sup> Within a postcolonial framework, the violence inherent in irony is not displaced by the assumed benevolence of an internal/self-self rapport.

Baudelaire, De Man and Bhabha offer useful insights into Ionesco's deconstruction of identity in *Nu*. The pamphlet is an apposite dramatization of the factiousness and over-determination of an identity which remains elusive, perpetually lost in the ironic folds of the text. But the split in this identity evinces the violence de Man chooses to silence. In Romania's case, the ironic self is twice removed from itself, more critically and geographically distant, by way of a cultural identification with a superior Western other, not at all free of neo-colonial violence toward its own kind. Hence its hyperbolic appetite for the absurd. Ionesco's deconstructive game fits de Man's interpretation but adds to it the missing political twist: Romania's ironic self is lost in a language and literature to which it accords ontological importance because the critical distance between internalized Western other and the empirical/local/messy self cannot be attenuated nor mediated.

---

<sup>10</sup> De Man, pp. 212-13.

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, p. 173.

Terry Eagleton has perceptively gestured towards an understanding of irony as an emancipatory aesthetics in Irish modernism. Joyce's radical irony, he argues, reconciles the specific political problems of an emergent national identity with modernism's propensity for abstraction and rootlessness (cosmopolitanism). While it is difficult to talk of Romania as a postcolonial identity proper, its troubled relationship with the West – what has been termed “colonialism of the mind” – and the internalized stigma account for the presence of similar cultural and aesthetic symptoms.<sup>12</sup> The strong xenophobic reactions and neoromantic poetics of the *Sămănătorul* group, the mystical vitalist rhetoric of Ionescu's generation, as well as Ionescu's impassioned rejection of the Romanian literary establishment and dramatization of Romania's identity neurosis are partly effects of a neo-colonial cultural politics. Ionescu's formal solution to Romania's identity qualms, as well as the Romanian tradition of hyper-criticism which uses irony to mediate the clash of divergent realities and forms, similarly indicate a strong connection between formal radicalization and national invention. Even though Romania inhabited the grey area of minor cultures, politically vulnerable and disenfranchised, culturally marginalized, but not postcolonial in the literal meaning of the term, its affinities and shared predicaments with postcolonial cultures provide valuable reading cues.

Whereas irony is usually read as a retreat into the apolitical dimension of style much more could be done to read its political energy, particularly in post-colonial and marginalized cultures. The Romanian modernist left's capitalization of the subversive potential of irony which, as I have shown, inspired Tzara's Dada aesthetics, is an emphatic illustration of this point. Yet, even the seemingly less aggressive irony of *zeflemea* underscores the political potential of irony. As with the making of a postcolonial identity, self-consciousness, ironic detachment, conflicting sensibilities and allegiances, oblique and multidirectional exchanges, mutations, transversal splits, transculturations, the wilful conflation of identity and literature, create epistemological fissures which only irony can articulate. *Absurd Romania* is the aesthetic inflection of this hybridity, in-between-ness and lack of closure.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Kiberd, p. 6.



## Bibliography

- Aderca, Felix, *Mărturia Unei Generații. Măști de Marcel Iancu* (Bucharest: S. Ciornei, 1929)
- Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984)
- Alecsandri, Vasile, "Dictionaru Grotescu," in *Convorbiri Literare* 3, no. 11 (1 August 1869), 173-78
- "Iașii in 1844" in *Opere Complete* [Complete Works], 3 vols, (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei Socecu, 1876), III, pp. 98-117
- Alexandrescu, Sorin, "Paradoxul Român", *International Journal of Romanian Studies*, 1 (1976), 9-20
- Allen, Graham, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Arghezi, Tudor, *Rugă de Seară* [Evening Prayer], *Viața Socială* (February 1910), p. 1
- "Neamul Românesc Zgârie Branză", *Facla*, 41 (18 October 1912), 821-22
- Armstrong, Tim, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005)
- Bahun, Sanja, "The Balkans Uncovered: Toward *Histoire Croisée* of Modernism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), pp. 25-47
- Bahun-Radunovic, Sanja and Marinos Pourgouris *Avant-Garde and the Margin: New Territories of Modernism*, (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006)
- Baiculescu, George et al, *Publicații Periodice Românești. Ziare, Reviste, Gazete II* [Romanian Periodicals. Newspapers, Gazettes and Reviews II] (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1969)
- Baudelaire, Charles, "Of the Essence of Laughter" in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. by P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972)
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1965)
- *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas UP, 1981)
- Bakić-Hayden, Milica, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia", *Slavic Review* 54 (1995), 917-31
- Behler, Ernst, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990)

- Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin, 1982)
- Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2004)
- Bjelić, Dušan and Obrad Savić, *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2002)
- Boatca, Mihaela, “Define and Rule: The Role of Orientalism in (Re)Colonising Eastern Europe”, in *Islam and the Orientalist World-System*, ed. Khaldoun Samman and Mazhar Al-Zo’By (London: Routledge, 2016 [2008]), pp. 187-201
- Boia, Lucian, *Romania: Borderland of Europe*, trans. Christian Brown (London: Reaktion Books, 2001)
- Boliac, Cezar “Mozaicul Social” in *Gândirea Românească in Epoca Pașoptistă (1830-1860)*, ed. by Paul Cornea and Mihai Zamfir (Bucharest: Editura Pentru Literatura, 1969), pp. 449-61
- Bradbury, Malcom, and James MacFarlane, *Modernism* (New York: Penguin, 1976)
- Bratianu, Ion C., “Memoriu Asupra Românilor Dat Imparatului Napoleon AL III-lea” in *Din Scrierile și Cuvântarile lui Ion C. Brătianu: Lupta pentru Redeșteptarea națională* (Iași: Moldova, 2002), pp. 152- 58
- “Naționalitatea” in *Din Scrierile și Cuvântarile lui Ion C. Bratianu: Lupta pentru Redeșteptarea națională* (Iasi: Moldova, 2002), pp. 158-89
- Brooker, Peter et al, *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Volume III, Europe 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013)
- Sascha Bru, *Democracy, Law and the Modernist Avant-Gardes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009)
- Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984)
- Călinescu, George, *Istoria Literaturii Române. Compendiu* [The History of Romanian Literature. Compendium] (Bucharest: Litera International, 2001)
- Călinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987)
- Eugène Ionesco: Teme Identitare și Existențiale* [Eugène Ionesco: Existential and Identity Themes] (Iasi: Junimea, 2006)
- “Ionesco and *Rhinoceros*: Personal and Political Backgrounds”, *East European Politics and Societies*, 9 (1995), 393-432

- Campbell, John C., *French Influence and the Rise of Romanian Nationalism: The Generation of 1848 (1830-1857)*, (New York: Arno Press, 1971)
- Camus, Albert, *Le Myth de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942)
- Caragiale, I. L., “Aparitia Noastra” [Our Appearance], *Moftul*, 1 (24 January 1893), 1-2 (pp. 1-2).
- *Despre Lume, Artă și Neamul Românesc* (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1994)
- “Moftangioaica”, *Moftul* 5 (11 Feb. 1893), 1
- *Nuvele și Povestiri* [Novellas and Short Stories] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1947)
- *Opere Alese I. Teatru* [Selected Works I: Theatre] (Bucharest: Cugetarea, 1940)
- *Opere Complete: Momente, Schițe, Amintiri* [Complete Works: Moments, Sketches, Memories] (Bucharest: Minerva, 1908)
- “Politica și Cultură” in *Opere* (Bucharest: Cultura Națională, 1932), pp. 93-100
- “Profesie de Credință” [Profession of Faith] in *Claponul*, 1 (1877), 3-6
- “Rășbelul” [The War], *Claponul* 1 (1877), 13-16
- “Situațiunea Europei”, *Claponul* 2, 11-18
- Casanova, Pascale, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (London: Verso, 2006)
- *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M.B. DeBevoise (London: Harvard UP, 2004)
- Cazimir, Stefan, *I.L. Caragiale Față cu Kitsch-ul* [I.L. Caragiale Facing the Kitsch Culture] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1988)
- Cernat, Paul, *Avangarda Românească și Complexul Periferiei* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2007)
- Cheah, Pheng and Bruce Robbins, *Cosmopolitics : Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)
- “Introduction Part II: The Cosmopolitical Today” in *Cosmopolitics : Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. by Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 20-41 (p. 31)
- Chendi, Ilarie, “Viața Literară in 1911”, *Luceafărul*, 3 (1912), 61-65
- Cioculescu, Șerban, *Aspecte Lirice Contemporane* (Bucharest: Casa Școalelor, 1942)
- Cioran, E.M., *The Temptation to Exist*, trans. by Richard Howard (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968)
- *Schimbaria la Față a României* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990)
- Cleynen-Serghiev, Ecaterina, *La Jeunesse Littéraire d' Eugène Ionesco* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993)

- Coccea, N.D. "Către Cititori" [To the Readers], *Viața Socială* (December 1910), 265-66  
 —*Pamflete Antidinastice* [Anti-dynastic Pamphlets] (Bucharest: Editura de Stat, 1949)  
 —"Spre Arta Viitoare. Presentul" [Towards Future Art. The Present], *Pagini Libere*  
 3 (August 1908), 83-5  
 —"Spre Arta Viitoare. Viitorul. [Towards Future Art. The Future]. *Pagini Libere* 24  
 (August 1908), 135-38
- Cornea Paul and Mihai Zamfir, *Gândirea Românească în Epoca Pașoptistă (1830-1860)*  
 (Bucharest: Editura Pentru Literatura, 1969)
- Cotter, Sean, *Literary Translation and the Idea of a Minor Romania* (New York: Rochester  
 UP, 2014)
- Crohmălniceanu, Ovid, *Literatura Română între cele Două Războaie Mondiale* [Romanian  
 Literature between the Two World Wars], 2 vols (Hasefer: Bucharest, 2003)  
 —*Evreii în Mișcarea de Avangardă Românească* (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2001)
- Davidescu, Nicolae, *Aspecte și Direcții Literare* (Craiova: Aius, 2010)
- Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Canberra: Hobgoblin Press, 2002)
- De Man, Paul, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*  
 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983)
- Djurić, Dubravka and Miško Šuvaković, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes,  
 Neo-Avant Garde and Post-Avant-Gardes, 1918-1991* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2003)
- Drace-Francis, Alex, *The Making of Modern Romanian Culture: Literacy and the  
 Development of National Identity* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006)
- Eagleton, Terry, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment", in Terry Eagleton et al,  
*Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (London: University of Minnesota Press,  
 1990), pp. 23-39  
 —*Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970)  
 —*The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)  
 —*Literary Theory. An Introduction* (Minnesota: Minnesota UP, 1996)
- Esslin, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin, 1961)
- Fine, Robert and Robin Cohen, "Four Cosmopolitan Moments" in *Conceiving  
 cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*, ed. by Robin Cohen and Steven  
 Vertovec (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), pp. 137-62
- Fundoianu, Benjamin, *Imagini și cărți din Franța* [Images and Books from France]  
 (Bucharest: ICR, 2006)  
 —"Ferestre spre Occident", *Contimporanul*, Anul 1, No. 1, 3 Iunie 1922

- Gaensbauer, Deborah B., *Eugène Ionesco Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1996)
- Gallagher, Tom, *Theft of a Nation : Romania since Communism*, (London: C. Hurst, 2005)
- Gildea, Robert, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987)
- Gluck, Mary, “The Modernist as a Primitive: The Cultural Role of Endre Ady in Fin-de-Siècle Hungary”, *Austrian History Yearbook* 33 (2002), 149-62
- Hamdan, Alexandra, *Ionescu inainte de Ionesco: Portretul Artistului Tânăr* [Ionescu before Ionesco: The Portrait of the Young Artist] (Bucharest: Seculum, 1998)
- Hentea, Marius, *TaTa Dada: The Real Life and Celestial Adventures of Tristan Tzara* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 2014)
- Hitchins, Keith, *Rumania 1866-1947* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994)
- Huyssen, Andreas, “Geographies of Modernism”, *New German Critique*, 34 (2007)
- Ibrăileanu, Garabet, *Spiritul Critic in Cultura Românească* [The Critical Spirit in Romanian Culture] (Chisinau: Editura Litera, 1996)
- Impey, Michael, “Before and After Tzara: Romanian Contributions to Dada,” in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe, and Japan*, eds. Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), pp. 131-32
- Ionesco, Eugène, *Antidoturi* [Antidotes], trans. by Marina Dimov (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993)
- Eu* [Me] (Cluj: Echinoc, 1990)
- Four Plays: The Bald Soprano, The Lesson, Jack or the Submission, The Chairs*, trans. by Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1958) (New York: Grove Press, 1958)
- Littérature Roumaine suivi de Grosse Chaleur* (Cognac: Fata Morgana, 1998)
- Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, trans. by Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964)
- Nu* [No] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011)
- Război cu Toată Lumea*, 2 vols (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992)
- Sub Semnul Întrebării* [Under Question Mark] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994)
- Ionesco Marie-France, “Ionesco s-a simțit în exil în România, nu în Franța” [Ionesco Felt He Was in Exile in Romania, not in France] (Open Letter), *Evenimentul Zilei* [online], 10 July 2009 < <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/ionesco-s-a-simtiti-in-exil-in-romania-nu-in-franta-858397.html> > [accessed 20 December 2012]
- Ionescu, Gelu, *Anatomia Unei Negații* [The Anatomy of a Negation] (Bucharest: Minerva, 1991)
- “Prolog” [Prologue] in Eugène Ionesco, *Eu* (Cluj: Echinoc, 1990), pp. 195-207

- Iorga, Nicolae, “Două procese” [Two Trials] in *Neamul Românesc* 85-86 (3 August 1912), p. 1345
- “Pentru Jigodii și Jigăni” in *Neamul Românesc* VII 119, 19 October 1912, p. 2041
- Isac, Emil “Familia Popescu”, *Facla* 18 August 1912
- “Melodii Bizare. Două inmormantari”, *Facla* 41 (18 or 13 Oct. 1912) —“Protopopii Familiei Mele” [The Bishops in My Family], *Simbolul* 25 October 1912
- Jameson, Fredric, “The End of Temporality”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer 2003), 695-718
- *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke UP, 1991
- *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971)
- Jianu, Angela, *A Circle of Friends: Romanian Revolutionaries and Political Exile, 1840-1859* (Leiden: Brill, 2011)
- Kiberd, Declan, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996)
- Kogălniceanu, Mihail, *Opere* [Works], ed. by Dan Simonescu et al, 5 vols (Bucharest: 1974)
- Kovačević, Nataša, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2008)
- Kristeva, Julia, *Nations without Nationalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993)
- Kronfeld, Chana, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: California UP, 1996)
- Lamont, Rosette C., *Ionesco’s Imperatives: The Politics of Culture* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993)
- Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1991)
- Lehmann, A.G., *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France: 1885-1895* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968)
- Levinson, Marjorie, “What is New Formalism?”, *PMLA* 122 (2007), 558-569
- Lewis, Pericles, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007)
- Livezeanu, Irina, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995)
- Lovinescu, Eugen, *Istoria Civilizației Române Moderne* [The History of Romanian Modern Civilization] (Bucharest: Editura Stiintifica, 1972)

- Istoria Literaturii Române Contemporane II. Evoluția Criticei Literare* [The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature II. The Evolution of Literary Criticism] (Bucharest: Ancora, 1926)
- Lupaș, Maria, "Ionesco contre la littérature mineure? Le cas de la littérature roumaine", <<  
<http://e-lla.univ-provence.fr/pdf/article53.pdf>>> [accessed 1 November 2013]
- Lupu, Gabriela "Marie-France Ionesco Boicoteaza Centenarul Ionesco pe Pamant Românesc", *Cotidianul* [Online], 25 February 2009  
 <[http://old.cotidianul.ro/marie\\_france\\_boicoteaza\\_centenarul\\_ionescu\\_pe\\_pamant\\_romanes-74718.html](http://old.cotidianul.ro/marie_france_boicoteaza_centenarul_ionescu_pe_pamant_romanes-74718.html)> [accessed 20 December 2011]
- Lyon, Janet, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999)
- "Cosmopolitanism and Modernism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. by Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), pp. 388-412
- Maiorescu, Titu "In Contra Direcției de Astăzi in Cultura Româna (1868)" [Against the Contemporary Direction in Romanian Culture], in *Critice* [Critiques], 2 vols (Bucharest: Minerva, 2008), I, pp.1 35-47
- "Beția de Cuvinte" [The Inebriation with Words] in *Critice* [Critiques], 2 vols (Bucharest: Minerva, 2008), pp. 219-35
- "Răspunsurile 'Revistei Contemporane'. Al Doilea Studiu de Patologie Literară" [The Answers of *The Contemporary Review*. The Second Study of Literary Pathology] in *Critice*, 2 vols (Bucharest: Minerva, 2008), I, pp. 236-41
- Maniu, Adrian, *Minciuni Trăite, Simbolul*, 4 (25 December 1912)
- *Mirela* in *Simbolul* 3 (1 December 1912)
- *Noapte de Mai* [May Night], *Simbolul* 3 (1 December 1912)
- Marinescu, Luiza, "Modernitate Mediatică in Lumea Operei lui Ion Luca Caragiale" [Media Modernity in the World of Ion Luca Caragiale's Oeuvre], *Philologica Jassyensia*, 16 (2012), 87-100
- Matei, Sorin Adam, *Boierii Minții: Intelectualii Români Intre Grupurile de Prestigiu și Piața Liberă a Ideilor* [The Boyars of the Mind: Romanian Intellectuals between Prestige Groups and the Free Market of Ideas] (Bucharest: Compania, 2004)
- Mazower, Mark, *The Balkans* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000)
- Miller, Tyrus, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: California UP, 1999).
- Mishkova, Diana, *We the People: Politics of National Peculiarity in Southeastern Europe*, ed. (Budapest: Central European UP, 2009)

- Murărașu, Dumitru, *Istoria Literaturii Române* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1946)
- Negruzzi, Constantin, *Scrierile lui Constantin Negruzzi* [The Writings of Constantin Negruzzi] (Bucharest: Libraria Socecu, 1872)
- Negruzzi, Iacob, *Amintiri de la Junimea* [Memories from Junimea] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011)
- Nicholls, Peter, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkley: Berkley UP, 1995)
- Ornea, Z., *Anii Treizeci. Extrema Dreaptă Românească* [The Thirties: The Romanian Extreme Right] (Bucharest: Editura Fundatiei Culturale Romane)
- Oehler, Dolf, *Le Spleen Contre L'Oubli. Juin 1848: Baudelaire, Flaubert, Heine, Herzen*, trans. by Guy Petitdemange (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1996).
- Pană, Sașa, “Insurecția de la Zurich prezentată de Sașa Pană” in Tristan Tzara, *Primele Poeme* [First Poems] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1971)
- Pârvulescu, Ioana, *Lumea ca Ziar. A Patra Putere: Caragiale* [The World as Newspaper. The Fourth Power: Caragiale] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2011)
- Perloff, Marjorie, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant-guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986)
- Petreu, Marta, *Ionescu în Țara Tatălui* [Ionesco in the Country of the Father] (Bucharest: Polirom, 2012)
- Petrovici, Georgeta, “Eugène Ionesco Interzis Romanilor”, *Evenimentul Zilei* [Online], 02 April 2009 <<http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/eugne-ionesco-interzis-romanilor-845750.html> > [accessed 20 December 2011]
- Pienescu, “Corvoada Gingașă” in *Viața Românească*, 49 (2012), <[http://www.viataromaneasca.eu/arhiva/78\\_via-a-romaneasca-5-6-2012/49\\_note-din-lantru/1181\\_corvoada-ginga-a-v.html](http://www.viataromaneasca.eu/arhiva/78_via-a-romaneasca-5-6-2012/49_note-din-lantru/1181_corvoada-ginga-a-v.html)> [accessed 19 April 2014]
- Pippidi, Andrei, “Les ‘Formes Vides’, Hier et Aujourd’hui”, *Revue des études sud-est européennes*, XXX (1992), 209-16
- Poggioli, Renato, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968)
- Pop, Ion, *Introducere în Avangarda Literară Românească* (Bucharest: Institutul Cultural Roman, 2007)
- Popa, Grigore T., “Tot ‘Zdreanța Roșie’..” [Again the Red Rag], *Neamul Românesc*, 98-99, 3 Sept. 1912
- Potter, Rachel, *Modernist Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012)



- Puchner, Martin, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP)
- Quinney, Anne Halloway, "The Franco-Romanian Ionesco Combats Rhinocerotis," *South-Central Review*, 24 (2007), 36-52
- Rădulescu-Motru, Constantin, *Cultura Română și Politicianismul*, [Romanian Culture and Politicization] (Bucharest: Libraria Socecu, 1904)
- Reed, John and Boardman Robinson, *The War in Eastern Europe* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916)
- Robbins, Bruce, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism", in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1998), pp. 246-264
- Russo, Alecu, "Poezia populară" [The Popular Poetry],  
 <[http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Poezia\\_poporală](http://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Poezia_poporală)> [accessed 13 October 2012]
- Sandqvist, Tom, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* (London: MIT, 2006)
- Sanyal, Debarati, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 2006)
- Schwarz, Roberto, "A Brazilian Breakthrough", *New Left Review* 36 (2005), 91-107
- Smith, Richard Candida, *Mallarme's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience* (Berkeley: California UP, 1999)
- Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Anchor, 1961)
- Spiridon, Monica, "Literature and the Symbolic Engineering of the European Self," *European Review* 17 (2009), 149-159
- Stahl, Henri H., *Gânditori și Curente de Istorie Socială Românească* [Thinkers and Movements of Romanian Social History] (Bucharest: Bucharest UP, 2001)
- Stanford Friedman, Susan, "World Modernisms, World Literatures, and Comparativity" in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, pp. 499-524
- Stern, Fritz, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961)
- Struțeanu, Scarlat "Introducere" in I.L. Caragiale, *Opere Alese I. Teatru* [Selected Works I: Theatre] (Bucharest: Cugetarea, 1940), pp. 22-28
- Șăineanu, Lazăr, *Influența Orientală Asupra Limbei și Culturei Române* [The Oriental Influence on Romanian Language and Culture] (Bucharest: Socecu, 1900)
- Terni, Jennifer L., "A Genre for Early Mass Culture: French Vaudeville and the City, 1830-1848", in *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006), 221-48
- Todorova, Maria, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997)

- Trencsenyi, Balazs, "History and Character: Visions of National Peculiarity in the Romanian Political Discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century" in *We the People: Politics of National Peculiarity in Southeastern Europe*, ed. Diana Mishkova (Budapest: Central European UP, 2009)
- Tucan, Dumitru, *Eugène Ionesco: Teatru, Metateatru, Autenticitate* [Eugène Ionesco: Theatre, Meta-Theatre, Authenticity] (Timisoara: Editura Universitatii de Vest, 2015)
- Tzara, Tristan, *Cântec* [Song], *Simbolul*, 2 (15 November 1912), p. 23
- *Furtuna și Cântecul Dezertorului* [The Storm and the Defector's Song], *Chemarea*, 2 (11 October 1912), p. 27
- *Pe râul vieții*, *Simbolul* 1 (25 Oct. 1912), pp. 10-12
- *Primele Poeme* [First Poems] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1971)
- *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*, trans. by Barbara Wright (London: John Calder, 1977)
- Urmuz, *Pagini Bizare/Bizarre Pages* in *The Complete Works of Urmuz* (London: Atlas, 2006)
- Varga, Adriana, "Periphery to Center and Back: Exploring Dada and the Absurd in the Context of Romanian Literary Traditions" in *Avant-Garde and the Margin: New Territories of Modernism*, ed. by Sanja Bahun-Radunovic and Marinos Pourgouris (New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), pp. 129-53
- Vartic, Ion, "Epilog" [Epilogue] in Eugen Ionescu, *Eu [Me]* (Cluj: Echinoc, 1990), pp. 225-35
- Vianu, Tudor et al, *Istoria Literaturii Române Moderne* [History of Romanian Modern Literature] (Bucharest: Casa Scoalelor, 1944)
- *Scriitori Români* [Romanian Writers], 3 vols (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971)
- Vinea, Ion, "Avertisment" in *Chemarea* [The Calling], 1 (4 October 1915 )
- „Blestemul Leului”, *Contimporanul*, I. 14 (15 Octombrie 1922)
- "Note Repezi" in *Chemarea*, 2 (11 October 1914)
- "Sentimente și Interese" [Feelings and Interests], in *Chemarea*, 1 (4 October 1915)
- Williams, Raymond, "When Was Modernism", *New Left Review*, 175 (1989), 48-52
- Wolff, Larry, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of the Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).
- Wolfson, Susan J., "Reading for Form", *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000), 1-16
- Wollaeger, Mark and Matt Eatough, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012)

Zafiu, Rodica, “Păcatele Limbii: ‘Clipangiu’”[The Sins of the Language: “Clipangiu”],  
*Romania Literară*, 42 (2004) << <http://www.romlit.ro/clipangiu>>> [accessed 1  
November 2013].