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DEPOETIZE THE UNIVERSE.
MANIFESTOS OF ROMANIAN
SURREALISM

ABSTRACT

The main aim of my article is to investigate, or simply to highlight the evolution of the twofold character of Surrealism-influenced, and later Surrealist, manifestos in three consecutive stages of the avant-garde movement in Romania. I apply the notion of the avant-garde manifesto developed by Benedikt Hjartarson in his essay “Myths of Rupture. The Manifesto and the Concept of Avant-Garde”, with the aim of taking a closer look at the anti-Surrealist Romanian manifestos of the mid-twenties, pre-Surrealist texts of the thirties, and the proper phase of the newly-established Romanian Surrealist Group’s discoveries in the forties.

KEY WORDS: Surrealism, manifesto, avant-garde, modernism.

The main aim of my article is to investigate, or simply to highlight the evolution of the twofold character of Surrealism-influenced, and later Surrealist, manifestos in three consecutive stages of the avant-garde movement in Romania. I would like to apply the notion of the avant-garde manifesto developed by Benedikt Hjartarson in his essay “Myths of Rupture. The Manifesto and the Concept of Avant-Garde” included in the anthology *Modernism* edited by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska, with the aim of taking a closer look at the anti-Surrealist Romanian manifestos of the mid-twenties, pre-Surrealist texts of the thirties, and the proper phase of the newly-established Romanian Surrealist Group’s discoveries in the forties.

In his text, Hjartarson observes that “the history of the manifesto represents a history of modernity in a nutshell. In this medium, different political groups, artistic movements, literary »schools« and individual authors have proclaimed and defined their ideas of modernity” (Hjartarson 2007: 173). The main role played by the manifesto itself in the avant-garde theatre, speaking in more metaphorical way, is not only related to the local movements or limited to the status of a sole medium of personal attacks inside them. The stakes are much higher. Being the elementary platform of developing the avant-garde, and, therefore, predominantly revolutionary ideas, the manifesto – and especially the Surrealist manifesto – is, simultaneously a vague literary genre, ranging from the theoretical, even philosophical essays to short announcements; from political statements to poetic collages. Moreover, it was the Surrealist period of the avant-garde movement when the vehicle of the manifesto accelerated as the proper means of transporting and sharing the revolutionary doctrine – both theoretically and practically, according to Michael Richardson’s and Krzysztof Fijałkowski’s concept of “magnētis-

ing power” of Surrealist declarations and postulates (Richardson & Fijałkowski 2001: 8–18).

As Hjartarson notes, “the genre is an open field of conflict in which different conceptions of modernity are played out against one another, thus manifesting the heterogeneous character of modernity” (Hjartarson 2007: 174). In these terms, modernity is not only a historical fact, but also, maybe more significantly, the major factor of the evolution in the broad sense. In this perspective, the manifesto stands for the most vehement form of protest against tradition, even the avant-garde one. The example of the Surrealist ideas, put forward or proclaimed in diversified manifestos inside the Romanian avant-garde movement, indicates that as a result of this, as Hjartarson says, “heterogeneous character” of modernist milieu, the formula of the manifesto allows it to abandon the role of a theory-carrier and to gain a new independent status of a literary text which combines the elements of various genres.

This brief introduction shows how strong, even peremptory, the role of the manifesto in the development of the avant-garde movement in Romania could be: being the main point of reference – in the negative or affirmative way – for the consecutive stages (or generations) of the avant-garde, they should be treated, according to Hjartarson’s metaphor, as “the story of Surrealism in the nutshell” (Hjartarson 2007: 173)¹. My general thesis, which I’ll try only to outline in this text, is that there is no conspicuous connection between the aforementioned three parts – or, in Paul Cernat’s words, three “waves” (Cernat 2007a: 5–6) – of the Romanian avant-garde; the only link, which simultaneously sets the boundaries between them, is the attitude towards Surrealism expressed in manifestos. Initially suspicious, it was later (as Ion Pop notes) marked by some “superficial acceptance” (Pop 1990: 117), and ultimately adopting – or even extending – its aesthetic premises. In this context the main problem is the way in which this evolving attitude echoed in the developing model of the manifesto itself.

The first avant-garde manifestos in Romania (almost all of them published in Bucharest) were written in 1923. Because of this chronological lag (compared to the history of the initial avant-garde currents in Italy, France, Germany or Russia), the Romanian promoters of the avant-garde do not reconstitute any of the literary trends: Marinetti’s Futurism, Tzara’s Dadaism and Naum Gabo’s constructivism intermingle on the pages of *Contimporanul* (The Contemporary). Interestingly enough, *Contimporanul* gave a short presentation of André Breton’s first “Manifesto of Surrealism” in one of the issues in late 1924. This superficial note, which was an unsuccessful attempt to outline in a few sentences the crucial points of Breton’s text, is written in a rather dismissive tone; for instance: “Mr. Breton (...) with his common aggression attacks all kinds of literary expression” (*Contimporanul* 1924: 15)². Its author apparently does not intend to analyze Breton’s manifesto; on the contrary, he prefers to share his indignation with his readers. The indignation, it should be emphasized, results from the lack of will to understand the elementary notions as surreality or objective chance. However, *Contimporanul* with Ion Vinea as its leader follows the path of rather moderate avant-

¹ This concept is analogical to Fijałkowski&Richardson’s notion of the “material testimony” of the manifestos, which plays a significant role in coagulation of the Surrealist *milieu*.

² English translation mine (J. K.).

garde, focusing on promotion of young Romanian modernism (see: Cernat 2007b). Meanwhile, the role of a key player in the avant-garde strategies of the mid-twenties belongs to Ilarie Voronca, a poet and theoretician, who starts to publish one magazine after another. In the unique issue of *75 HP.*, from October 1924, Voronca gathers the *crème de la crème* of the fledging avant-garde – Stéphane Roll, Victor Brauner or Max Hermann Maxy, to name only the few. The editors call themselves (in French, as it was the main avant-garde language of the time, especially in Romania) “the only avant-garde group in Romania” (*75 HP.* 1924: 56), but the only traces of Surrealism in their magazine can be found in dada-inspired manifestos, with some lists of the qualities required from all those who intend to publish in the new magazine:

To collaborate with *75 HP.* one must:
 be a good dancer
 urinate on everything
 respect ones' parents
 have suffered an airplane crash
 not make literature
 have a certificate of good behavior
 drink sulfuric acid
 know boxing behead oneself twice a week
 THE CANDIDATE WILL HAVE TO PROVE:
 That he's got a straw hat instead of a heart
 that he's been using gutta-percha for intestines
 that he has got religious manias (ibidem: 56).

After the demise of *75 HP.* another magazine with Voronca onboard takes over: *Punct* (November 1924 – March 1925) presents itself as an “international magazine of constructive art”³. In its turn, *Punct* will be continued by *Integral* (March 1925 – April 1928), the most influential platform for exchanging the views in the first wave of the Romanian avant-garde. Voronca develops his notion of “Integralism” as a synthesis of the modern thought and arts, an amalgam of all the avant-garde “-isms” with single exception: Surrealism. When he writes in one of his numerous “Integralist” manifestos “Glasuri” (“Voices”; *Punct* 8, January 1925), “the real word nobody uttered yet: cubism, futurism, constructivism converge in the same spot: SYNTHESIS” (Voronca 2007b: 550), he omits Surrealism because, according to his words, “as a matter of fact the Surrealism of André Breton is belated duplication, based upon Freudianism, of the Zürich accomplishments of Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, Arp, Eggeling” (ibidem: 549). Surrealism, at that time the leading avant-garde movement, not only in France, but also in Serbia (the proto-Surrealist group coagulates around Marko Ristić in the mid-twenties⁴), seems to be an unnecessary burden for the prolific exponents of *Integral*. Voronca expresses his strong reserve towards Surrealism in the fervent pamphlet “Suprarealism și Integralism” (“Surrealism and Integralism”), published in the opening issue of *Integral*, March 1925. The biggest complaint is probably its supposed redundancy:

³ In the subtitles of the magazine: *Punct. Revista de artă constructivistă*.

⁴ And, after a short period of uncertainty, continues to act in the thirties with Ristić, Dušan Matić, Oskar Davičo among others.

Before the wealth of novelty of the preceding currents, surrealism does not contain a contribution its own. On the contrary, its doctrine signifies a belated return to a bygone source. (...) As doctrine, surrealism presents in consequence an already well-known principle. Principles aside, the artistic accomplishments of surrealism can be reduced to an unvaried duplication of the Dadaist experiments. (...) Dadaism was virile. Surrealism doesn't cause disturbances. And moreover, in essence, Surrealism doesn't respond to the rhythm of the times. (Voronca 2007a: 555–556)

Paradoxically, Voronca's depreciative attitude summed up in the Constructivist-inspired exclamation seems to be reactionary. On one hand, his goal is to put Romanian avant-garde into international circulation; on the other hand, he turns away from the most influential movement in those days. Surrealism is presented as a counterweight for Integralism that cannot fulfil the constructivist, and, therefore, positive expectations and meet the demands of an infinite progress.

At this instant of fixed synthesis, the Surrealist disintegration cannot answer any necessity. The naïve drawing, disorganised, Surrealist, cannot compete with the massive and virile design of Constructivism. Before the integral voice of the century, Surrealism signifies but an absence. Surrealism has ignored the century's voice, shouting "Integralism". After Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism shows up too late. Not the ill romantic disintegration of Surrealism, but the synthetic order, the essential order, constructive, classic, integral (ibidem: 556).

These words were slightly subdued by another exponent of the "Integralist" outline, Mihail Cosma. In his essay "De la Futurism la Integralism" ("From Futurism to Integralism"), published in *Integral* (n° 6–7 from 1925), Surrealist doctrine is somehow appreciated, albeit with easily perceptible disregard: "Surrealism (...), amidst the turbulent preoccupations of selection and generalization, created its doctrine – belatedly – out of the reminiscence of the subconscious. (...) Not accepting particularism, we express our gratitude to surrealism for its good intentions, and subsume it" (Cosma 2007: 559). Voronca and Cosma did not change their opinions even when the *Integral* epoch was declining⁵.

The change of the perspective – and the transition into the second phase of the avant-garde development – is underlined by the gradual vindication of Surrealism. In the first issue of *Urmuz* (January 1928), its leader Geo (George) Bogza for the first time highlights the new, expanded definition of "Integralism" with Surrealism as its full-fledged ingredient. What's interesting, now Surrealism stands alongside Constructivism as an example of dynamic, vital change initiated by the avant-garde movement: "But we who feel the freezing permeating actually, have the obligation to react. And then: motion, exceeding motion. The birth of Constructivism, Surrealism and all other dynamic "-isms" are crucial to our lives threatened by freezing" (Bogza 2007b: 569). *Urmuz* – borrowing its title from the nickname of Romanian avant-garde's "involuntary" patron, Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău – was rather a several-months warm-up before the emergence of the main medium of the second avant-garde wave started in April 1928.

⁵ For the wider perspective of the crucial role of the "first-wave" manifestos in Romanian avant-garde, see, for instance, Copaciu 2012.

Unu ('One'), a Bucharest-based magazine, from its first issues had a rather eclectic formula, sampling some of the unfailing elements from the Dadaist, Futurist, but also – a real novelty – Surrealist repertoire. Sașa Pană and Geo Bogza, the main figures of *Unu*, quickly overcame their reluctance towards Surrealism expressed for several years by Ilarie Voronca in the columns of *Integral*. They seemed to be aware of the strong impact that Surrealism had not only on France or Belgium, but also on Belgrade or Prague. Therefore, they couldn't remain indifferent and decided at the very beginning of the *Unu* epoch to include Surrealism in the massive Integralist legacy. In the inaugural issue of his magazine (from April 1928) Pană published the so-called "Manifesto" which, albeit written in early-Futurist poetics, coagulated all the avant-garde authorities of the time, including the Surrealist ones, together with the well-known slogans of modernity: „»readers, disinsect your brains!« / kettledrum cry / airplane / wireless telegraphy – radio / television / 76 h.p. / marinetti / breton / vinea / tzara / ribemont dessaignes (...) / hurraay / hurrraaay / hurrrraaaaay / the library trash is burning" (Pană 2007: 708). It is easy to notice that the post-integralist paradigm maintained the proper one: the so-called Surrealism-inclusive processes did not occur on the doctrine level, but, for that moment, remained a predominantly superficial addition to Voronca's earlier theories.

By the beginning of 1930s, Surrealist tendencies were stabilizing. *Unu* strengthened the collaboration with Romanian artists residing in France who were members of the French Surrealist Group, like Victor Brauner, Benjamin Fondane, Jacques Herold and Jules Perahim. At the same time, Voronca's influence on the magazine's line was decreasing. Instead of some vociferous manifestos published in the initial phase, the editors of *Unu* – especially Geo Bogza – began to prefer long, profound essays on the avant-garde aesthetics, or, most of all, on the future of the movement itself. The majority of these texts focused on the Surrealist doctrine with its categories of the sub-conscious or irrationality. Nevertheless, to be exact, it was not always done in an explicit way. One of the most successful achievements were Geo Bogza's essays "Exasperarea creatoare" ("Creative Exasperation"), and, in particular, "Reabilitarea visului" ("The Rehabilitation of the Dream") from *Unu* n° 34, March 1931. Openly inspired by André Breton's Surrealist manifestos, as well as some of his other texts, Bogza, probably for the first time in the history of Romanian avant-garde, utilized one of the main Surrealist notions in its proper meaning: to build an original, dense and literary convincing vision of a dream-driven reality:

And I'm considering the anthology of the dream, told the simple way, without any skills, because a dream is beautiful owing to its very substance that shouldn't be deteriorated by any one style or fantasy. (...) And I love dreams because they are subversive. Because they drill into the flesh and re-establish the imminences of a blind justice (...). I confess I'm happy when I see a rigid, stern cabinet minister or university professor and I think maybe tonight he'll dream of masturbating like a boy. Or a majestic metropolitan bishop, finding himself gasping in sweat in the room of some cheap neighborhood prostitute. (Bogza 2007a: 718)

The essay's title could probably refer to the anti-Surrealist attitude of the early stages of the Romanian avant-garde movement. This emblematic "rehabilitation" is

enhanced by the direct presence of Freudian imagery. Moreover, using this kind of a mixture of simultaneously poetic and ideological instruments, Bogza introduced the theme of total revolution, one of the Breton's most beloved projects⁶. "The world is shivering with all its senses" (ibidem) – he writes in the conclusion, announcing not only a new era of mankind, but also the decline of the first generation, or rather the "first wave", of the Romanian avant-garde, as Paul Cernat (Cernat 2007a: 5–6) or Ovidiu Morar (Morar 2003: 11) describe it. According to Petre Răileanu, "this first wave of Romanian Surrealism, represented by the »Unu« group, and which was rather shy, did not use this kind of writing" (Răileanu 1999: 72). By "this kind" he means automatic writing or *le cadavre exquis*.

Despite these problems, a new generation of young radical hotspurs, contributors or admirers of *Unu* showed up on the avant-garde scene with the unconcealed will to smuggle in at least a few grams of Surrealism. Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun and Jules Perahim, the leading representatives of this circle, in the early 1930s grouped around *Alge* ('Sea Weeds') magazine. But it was in December 1933 when they teamed up with Geo Bogza, an ex-*Unu*-ist, to publish the first (and as it turned out, the last) issue of *Viața imediată* ('The Immediate Life'). Together they signed an opening manifesto: "Poezia pe care vrem să o facem" ("Poetry we want to create") which stands for the strongest pro-Surrealist (and, at the same time, clearly pre- or proto-Surrealist) voice in those days. The *clou* was to challenge the entire contribution of the earlier avant-garde manifestations, including the era of *Unu*, for their insufficient radicalism: Pană and Voronca were accused of being "the knights of hermetic modernism" (Bogza, Păun, Luca, Perahim 1999: 73), who reduced poetry only to a matter of technique. Răileanu detects in the essay "Poezia pe care vrem să o facem" some traces of Breton's influence, namely those of the first "Manifesto of Surrealism" from 1924:

This poetry had to accompany man in his existential adventure, recovering its vigor by a return to the sources: life. The »convulsive beauty« Breton talked about became in the text of the Romanian writers »violent beauty« and the surrealist credo taken from Lautréamont is to be found, barely modified, in the complementary version »poetry for all«. (ibidem: 72)

Apart from the obvious will to proclaim the group's eagerness to destroy all tradition, even that of the avant-garde, and to establish the new, vehemently nihilist order, Luca and company attempted to write a new definition of art: the art deprived of its institutional (and: to some extent aesthetic) character. Therefore poetry had to be "edgy" and "bristly", while the poet himself had to oppose all rational dogmas (ibidem: 72–73)⁷. This manifesto is considered emblematic for one more reason: it marked the end of both the second stage of the Romanian avant-garde, and of the "first wave" of this "epidermal" (according to Paul Cernat's words) Surrealism (Cernat 2007a: 346). Out of the four authors, it was the Luca / Păun duo which began to publish their books increasingly closer to the Surrealist doctrine. After a few years of silence, along with

⁶ Developed mainly from the inaugural *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) to the *Crisis of the Object* (1936) where it is replaced by the notion of the "total revolution of the object".

⁷ The influence of Breton's manifestos in this passage is more than evident.

Gellu Naum, Dolfi Trost and Virgil Teodorescu, in 1939/1940 period they founded the Romanian Surrealist Group.

This, so-called “mature”, phase of Romanian Surrealism is marked by a vehement reception of Surrealist dogmas, but without a proper expression in the manifestos printed in magazines (the expected *Gradiva* was not finally published due to the war). Its role was taken over by several series editions, like “Infra-Noir” or “Colecția supra-realistă” (Surrealist Collection), which began to function as a support for expansion of Surrealist theories. In place of statement-manifestos connected mainly to the magazine circulation, the “book-oriented” ones proposed a new model of expressing ideas inside (or: under the guise of) the literary production. To be precise, even inside the proper phase of Romanian Surrealism between – in its broader meaning – 1936 and 1947, there is no unequivocal recipe for a manifesto as a medium of the new and revolutionary movement. Moreover, like most of the critics, as Ion Pop, Ovidiu Morar or Petre Răileanu among others, I believe that the two principal manifestoes of this phase of “mature” Surrealism, namely “The Critique of Squalor” (“Critica mizeriei”, signed by Gellu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu and Paul Păun) and Gherasim Luca’s and Dolfi Trost’s “Dialectics of the Dialectic” (written in French as “Dialectique de la Dialectique”), both from 1945, may not be the undeniable literary masterpieces, but still represent the highest points of the revolutionary aesthetics. The fact is that their significance is expressed in the attempt to overcome the enforced isolation caused by the hostilities of World War II and to join the international (by then rather political than artistic) Surrealist movement. As Luca and Trost agree in “Dialectics of the Dialectic”,

the transformation of surrealism into a trend of artistic revolt would put an end to its theoretical development, and following its progress through the inevitable stages of rejection and opprobrium, it would run the risk of sharing the fate of all movements of revolt, which always wind up being exploited, one way or another, by the class enemy (Luca & Trost 2001: 28).

Apart from this kind of ideologically-oriented fragments, Luca and Trost in longer passages describe the Romanian Surrealists’ artistic achievements as the discoveries of the “objectively offered object”, “entoptic graphomania” or “vaporizations”, thanks to which, as the authors confirm, they “have taken over new territories from the objective world” (ibidem: 31). According to Hjartarson’s ambiguous status of a manifesto which I have mentioned earlier, this “new beginning” of Surrealism in the post-war period of 1944–1946 was underlined by the invention of a new aesthetic formula. Gellu Naum, the then-leading representative of the movement, in his expanded cycles *Teribilul interzis* (‘Terrible Forbidden’), *Spectrul longevității* (‘The Specter of Longevity’), *L’Infra-noir* (‘Infra-black’) or *Éloge de Malombra* (‘Malombra’s Eulogy’) proposed a new pattern of the artistic, or rather: both artistic and ideological content put inside the collage of literary texts. I would classify them as “prose-poem-manifestos”, based directly on Petre Răileanu’s formula of “poem-manifesto” or “book-manifesto” (Răileanu 2005: 104–105).

Utilizing the aphorism- and diary-like writings (like *122 de cadavre – 122 cadavers* – from the *Terrible Forbidden*) or collective declarations and false documentaries (in *Malombra’s Eulogy*), Naum builds a new perspective of a manifesto, which can be an

efficient tool in “de-poetizing the universe” (Naum 2012: 175). This metaphor is based on two paradoxes. The first one seems to be connected with the status of poetry itself. For Naum, the notion of “poetry” means two utterly different things at the same time – it symbolizes the centuries-old tradition which deserves to be torn down and the artistic remedy, a dam which can stop this process of destruction. The latter notion, developed in Naum’s texts into a concept of “poetry in action” (ibidem: 169) is heightened by the second paradox: the paradox of the universe. The notion of “surreality”, defined by André Breton as a space of total liberation of man, in Romanian Surrealists’ manifestos gains a double aspect: thanks to their multilayered, simultaneously fictional and non-fictional character, it could belong to both the real world (as an ideological concept) and to the textual platform (as an element of a poetic vision). In other words, this “depoetizing” activity, resulting directly from this kind of paradoxical configuration, makes the manifestos of the Romanian Surrealism not only a special kind of the avant-garde genre, but also an immanent part of all other genres. A good example may be Gellu Naum’s *Medium* from 1945, bringing together elements of both essay and novel, which evokes some of the major Surrealist principles in a more or less straightforward way:

I love images, no matter what images, the stirring, baffling mystery-images that change the face of the universe. I believe that the unique, imperative task of poets is nowadays the discovery, the creation, the multiplication ad infinitum, the fostering beyond all limits of this tormenting mystery. (Naum 1999: 108)

Medium provides a proper exemplification of the manifesto’s twofold nature. It brings together the proposals and postulates, wrapping them in a poetic cocoon in a revolutionary way. What is important, the paradox of de-poetizing could be maintained in the notion of “changing the face of the universe” by using aesthetic, even oneiric tools. As Alistair Blyth observes in one of his essays (Blyth 2007: 28), Naum’s ideas expressed in his manifestos change into images in the series of “fluid transformations”.

To summarize, I’d like to return to Benedikt Hjartarson’s definition of the manifesto, is a factor of “rupture” and “delimitation”, and has served as a fundamental, “unique medium for proclamations and counter-proclamations, definitions and re-definitions of »the modern«. Manifestos do not simply mirror the paradoxes of modernity. As a meta-discourse of political and aesthetic modernity the manifesto is both a representative medium and a textual embodiment of their paradoxes” (Hjartarson 2007: 172). As I was attempting to prove in my article (which only outlines and briefly introduces the issue), the development of Romanian Surrealism illustrates this twofold quality in a distinct way.

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