

THE EAST AND WEST, SEPARATE BUT EQUAL? THE AVANT-GARDE  
SEARCHES FOR A NEW CULTURAL SPACE IN INTERWAR ROMANIA

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my cat for staying up nights and writing my thesis for me. I would like to ask the defense committee to take into consideration that he is only five years old and grade this work accordingly. Thank you.

## Abstract

My major contribution to the study of Romanian interwar history and the history of the avant-garde was using symbolical geography, that is, the real and imagined projection of perception of borders and the effect this had on the Romanian artists. I have learned that due to the many artistic influences that come across the borders through both time and space, the artists are forced to participate in a contradictory avant-garde. The literary motifs they use are constantly conflicting, and there is a continuous juxtaposition between the need to modernize and the pull and weight of the traditional environment (social, cultural, political) which surrounds them.

I started out treating the avant-garde as a separate segment of society but what I have discovered is interesting- not only were the avant-gardists trying to find their identity, but the confusion about their own identity went on a deeper level, and it was symptomatic of the Romanian interwar society at large. The Romanian avant-guardists were conflicted.

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## Introduction

The historical context of the recent formation of Greater Romania provided a lot of confusion to the social climate. Following the Great War, the changes were many and very important: in June 1920 all of Transylvania and part of Eastern Hungary were to be annexed to the “Fatherland”, as a result of the Treaty of Trianon. In October, Romania signed the treaty of the union of Bessarabia and Romania, which recognized the Dniester River as a boundary between Romania and Russia. In November, after a peace conference at Neuilly on the issue of Dobrudja, the borders between Romania and Bulgaria were left intact as previously established by the Peace of Bucharest in 1913.

All of the territorial acquisitions of 1920 added 156,000 square kilometers and 8 ½ million inhabitants to the pre-war kingdom<sup>1</sup>. However, in this process, significant minorities were also inherited, the most important being the Magyars (9.3 per cent of the total population), Jews (5.3 per cent), Ukrainians (4.7 per cent), and Germans (4.3 per cent). Economically, the new Romania was able to expand its productive capacity up to 235 per cent from 1916 to 1919, because of the newly acquired territories (Transylvania and Banat were mostly responsible for the increase).

However, these achievements were in stark contrast with the losses of war. When adding the number of soldiers killed to the civilian death, Romania is said to have lost one tenth of the pre-war population<sup>2</sup>. Industry and agriculture suffered tremendously- only 217 enterprises were left operating in 1917-18, while in 1915 there were 845. Similarly to industry,

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchins, Keith. *Rumania 1866-1947*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. pp 290

<sup>2</sup> Hitchins, Keith. *Rumania 1866-1947*. p. 291

in 1919-1920 Romania the grain production fell by 35 per cent as compared to 1911-1915, due to the insufficient manpower, draught animals, tools and machinery<sup>3</sup>.

While all of these changes were happening throughout the country, the avant-guardists, partly inspired by the trends outside the Romanian borders, felt the weight of creating a new identity for themselves and the new social and cultural they lived in. What resulted from their efforts was a fascinating explosion of artistic expression, a kaleidoscope of ideas and ideologies, which changed shapes every time the dial was turned.

Scholars have since tried to understand why this was, and have studied the Romanian avant-garde thoroughly, but have always frame their research in terms of time- since the aim of the avant-garde is indeed, the triumph over temporality. Few scholars have, however, structured their research on the avant-garde in terms of time and space, which provides a much more interactive and richer understanding of not only the avant-garde, but the society it functioned/or malfunctioned in. Some of the academics who did write on the spatial facet of the avant-garde were Timothy Benson and Ema Forcacs, in their two- volume work in which they try to encompass the entire avant-garde of Eastern and Central Europe, both visual and literary. Since their scope was so broad, there were many theoretical approaches and the books become more like a series of essays in which the approaches to critical avant-garde terms are different, and scattered.

Considering the Romanian avant-garde, there is only one book which deals the closest with the geographical approach to the avant-garde, despite the plethora of literature surrounding the movement. Paul Cernat's *The Romanian Avant-Garde and The Complex of the Periphery* is a well documented resources, but different in scope than my own research and does not focus on the artists' search for identity. Thus, while the book was useful and insightful and added an

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<sup>3</sup> Hitchins, Keith. *Rumania 1866-1947*. p. 291

important, previously unexplored side of the Romanian avant-garde, there was still crucial need for more research on the subject.

I started out treating the avant-garde as a separate segment of society but what I have discovered is interesting- not only were the avant-gardists trying to find their identity, but the confusion about their own identity went on a deeper level, and it was symptomatic of the Romanian interwar society at large. The Romanian avant-guardists were conflicted.

My major contribution to the study of Romanian interwar history and the history of the avant-garde was using symbolical geography, that is, the real and imagined projection of perception of borders and the effect this had on the Romanian artists. I have learned that due to the many artistic influences that come across the borders through both time and space, the artists are forced to participate in a contradictory avant-garde. The literary motifs they use are constantly conflicting, and there is a continuous juxtaposition between the need to modernize and the pull and weight of the traditional environment (social, cultural, political) which surrounds them.

In order to explore this dichotomy of feelings about their own identities, I follow the approach of a cultural map, which spans across time and space. Thus, in my first chapter I address what I call the formation of an international community of artists, which cross time and space, and group together with the help of different agendas and ideologies. In my second chapter, I zoom into my map on the historical borders of East and West and the ideologies, and cultural trends which emerge from these cultures, creating an impact on Romanian literature and on the avant-garde. This chapter, like the first, underlines the conflicting character of the artistic compositions springing from these influences- the artists try to part with the outside influences, especially with the historically negative concept of the east-in order to create a better society at home, but they realize they can't, because they are defined by the cultures they

are trying to shake off. My third chapter then focuses even more on the Romanian tradition in literature, inherited by the avant-garde, and the interaction between the want to break with this past and the will to modernize. However, just like before, the artists realize that in order to create their own identity and earn a secure space within Romanian literature, they need to incorporate the traditional ideas of the nature and primitive and folklore in their writings. That literature again dumbfounds them, because it makes it impossible to create a tabula rasa for a new society, which is what their modernism calls for.

My research has been limited to the study of literature, that is, the textual compositions submitted to the most prominent avant-garde magazines. I have chosen two of the most radical and two of the more moderate magazines in order to get a more complete picture of the common elements which spanned across the ideological borders of the artists. However, I still think that through the analysis of these most representative magazines it is possible to reach at the sound conclusion that the avant-garde, despite its many efforts to find itself and its own space within a confused Romania, has encountered as many questions as it found answers.

## **A Tale of Time and Space: The Avant-Garde and Symbolic Geography**

### **How have scholars looked at the avant-garde?**

“Modernism” is a term encountered when attempting to describe almost any piece of work created from the nineteenth century onward, as long as that product is not categorized as either silly, devoid of any scholastic merit, or overly-formal, in search of trends of the past, such as Romanticism or Realism. The early twentieth century saw an obsession in its leading exponents, in literature, politics, as well as the arts, an obsession formed around newness and

difference, a departure from the usual reverence paid to the masters of generations past. This obsession, now known as modernism, however, tends to span across all walks of intellectual pursuit, including figures such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire in the same category<sup>4</sup> - for example, and not taking into consideration their undeniably stark differences. If everything that the early twentieth century has given the light of day to and deemed “worth studying” by scholarship is included under the umbrella of modernism, it is clear that categories and brackets are made necessary. One such bracket is the avant-garde. However, simply because it is a bracket, it is not any easier to define. Strict definitions of the avant-garde are made improbable not only due to its wide use in references to artistic and literary movements, but, similarly to the attempts at pinpointing modernism, the avant-garde is highly dependent on its representatives and their ethno-cultural backgrounds.

As a subcategory of modernism, the avant-garde is the French term for “vanguard”, or simply put, ahead of its time, innovative, and is of course preoccupied with new ideologies, particularly in respect to politics, art and literature. However, it has become a term associated with art and literature only at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. It first emerged as a military idiom around the period of the French Revolution, and later was linked to the discourse of the Utopian Society. The avant-garde is a collective intellectual movement forward, away from the past and into the future, in a rather intensive form of modernism, yet this seems to be the only clear characteristic of the trend. For specifics, one must focus on each movement separately. In the early twentieth century it became associated mostly with the arts and literature, and expressed by subdivisions such as Italian Futurism or Russian Constructivism, and later on, the more popular artistic movements, such as Fauvism or Cubism. Thus, the actual dates associated with the emergence of the avant-garde

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<sup>4</sup> Szabolcsi, Miklos. *Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions*. P. 51

have been decided upon as 1905 to 1938, and its main limbs being, apart from the ones already mentioned, Dadaism and Surrealism.<sup>5</sup> One cannot confidently define the avant-garde by itself, but it can be better understood through categories such as those mentioned above. Its characteristics are uniquely shaped and molded by its exponents.

For the purposes of this paper, I will only analyze these terms in connection to literature, even though the avant-garde was present in Romania (my specific locus of interest and research) also through the visual arts. In fact, the visual component was very important to the avant-garde magazines I have decided to use for my research- but it will not be part of this project, since visual imagery is handled with a different theoretical approach.

The avant-garde in Central and Eastern Europe emerged from several different cultural and political pipelines. Most authors agree that one of the most important trademarks of Eastern European avant-garde is the initiation of “folklorization”<sup>6</sup>. The term describes this newly adopted modernism as its adaptation under the umbrella of nationalism in some cases, and its blending with local literary and political dogmas and quests in others. In any case, these forms of avant-garde blend the universal understanding of what it means to operate as an artist in this new spectrum of modernism with the long-established folkloric trends<sup>7</sup>.

Modernism in Romanian avant-garde literature shows up in two main forms: the radical and the more moderate one. Radical modernism is usually associated with the radical left, and present in magazines such as *one* or *Algae*. The more moderate modernism is rooted on the ideals of constructivism and futurism and it is mostly present in the magazines *The Contemporary* and *Integral*. *Integral* eventually invents its own “-ism”, preaching the

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<sup>5</sup> Szabolcsi, Miklos. Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions. P. 53

<sup>6</sup> Szabolcsi, Miklos. Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions. P. 62

<sup>7</sup> Szabolcsi, Miklos. Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions. P. 63

philosophy of integralism, which means trying to reach the state of cultural, social and political perfection by working together as a community.

### **Why Symbolic Geography when Studying the Romanian Avant-Garde?**

The notion of backwardness in the periphery of Europe has been embedded in the historiographical discourse surrounding the area, and it's not unproblematic. In her *Imagining the Balkans*, Maria Todorova introduces the expression "balkanism" for a particular type of backwardness present in the Balkans, which must be understood through the lens of Edward Said's "orientalism". The avant-garde, a term for art and literary movements ahead of their time, emerged from Central Eastern Europe as a denial of the past, revolution against the current backwardness and in search of Western modernism for a better future. Much has been written on the symbolic relationship between East and West in the Romanian cultural context recently, and the avant-garde has been thoroughly studied, but there is very sparse literature on the analysis of the metaphorical manifestation of the east/west affair within the Romanian avant-garde.

This is not the first time someone has approached the avant-garde from the geographical perspective. Jane Ashton Sharp explores the symbolical concept of borders (cultural, political, gender) from the perspective of avant-garde artist Natalia Goncharova in her *Russian Modernism between East and West*. The author investigates the duality of the east/west in Goncharova's work, as well as how she related to the other modernist artists in Russia and Western Europe. Sharp attempts to explain the quest for a national identity in the entire Russian avant-garde by looking at the swaying elements of orientalism, primitivism, as well as the desire for westernization which appear in Goncharova's paintings.

This approach could not work for the study of the Romanian avant-garde for several reasons. First, I am analyzing text, and not visual material. Second, the method of choosing one

single author to be representative of the whole movement would not be appropriate, since such a person does not exist. While reading this work, it will hopefully become apparent that there are many layers, aims and agendas behind the different types of Romanian avant-garde- some political, some aesthetic, and some intellectual, but different nonetheless. What unites them is a tireless search and competitive for a place within a society just as confused about its newly-acquired identity as they are.

The purpose of this study is also very different. While in her book Sharp mainly focuses on the eastern and western dimension of the Russian avant-garde, I am trying to engage with three different layers of geography: the international, the east/west, and the national, while trying to understand the writers' quest for identity through all these geographical dimensions.

There is some literature following the geographical discourse on the avant-garde of Central and Eastern Europe, but not much. Most notable are the ambitious two-volume works edited by Timothy Benson and Eva Forgacs, which were created to accompany a number of exhibitions on modernism in Los Angeles, Munich and Berlin between March 2002 and February 2003.<sup>8</sup> The two works are collections of essays written on the emergence of modernism and avant-garde art and architecture in the area. As Tyrus Miller points out in his review essay, because both volumes are massive in their scale and scope, they are invaluable because of the amount of information, but also problematic because of the complexity of the material and the frameworks utilized in the texts. Miller writes that the volumes use three overlapping frameworks: first, the chronological procession, then the volumes are organized by using a few important topics among which one can find "internationalism", "art and social change", "style of the crucible of past and future", and "the twilight of ideologies". Further, the

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<sup>8</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Rethinking Central Europe: The Symbolic Geography of the Avant-Garde*. Review Essay, *Modernism/modernity*, v10, no.3, 2003, The Johns Hopkins University Press, p 561

texts are grouped on national and city contexts. Thus it is noticeable how such a mixture of theoretical framework can emerge confusing.<sup>9</sup> Miller explains, "the overlay and juxtaposition of frameworks have the typical ambiguity as well as the suggested complexity of a modernist artwork", therefore noting that even with such an incredible compedium, there is still a lack of clear literature regarding the symbolic geography of the Central/ Eastern European avant-garde.

Miller also notes that the authors of the texts are not consistent in their approach to a specific avant-garde, swaying from calling it national to transnational, transcending borders. Also, there is a strange selection of key figures- Marcel Janco is included, while the founder of dada, Tristan Tzara, is not.<sup>10</sup> The volumes, however, are crucial in understanding the role of the Central/East European artists in the "topography of dispersal" providing a model of study for the entire avant-garde, not just the one of the region.<sup>11</sup> Other than the two volumes edited by Benson and Forcacs, symbolic literature on Eastern Europe is mostly written by Tyrus Miller and Yugoslavia.

Symbolic geography shows up in Romanian literature mostly through the writings of Cornel Ungureanu, Tudor Vianu and Mircea Muthu. While Ungureanu is concerned with exiles and how culture transcends across all borders, Muthu and Vianu focus mostly on the influence on "balkanism" and south-east european folklore and cultural heritage on Romanian literature. In his three-volume work, Muthu explains the emergence of balkanism and Byzantine influences on Romanian literature, including the history of reoccurring archetypes, and the delimitations between east and west and in Romanian literature. Angelo Mitchievici is another writer who deals with exiles- but to Russia.

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, p 562

<sup>10</sup> Miller, p 563

<sup>11</sup> Miller, p 564

The closest to a study of a geographical discourse on the Romanian literary avant-garde is essayist and literary critic Paul Cernat, who writes *The Romanian Avant-Garde and the Complex of the Periphery*<sup>12</sup>. His approach was indeed very useful to my research, since he addressed many of the intricacies and relationships present within the different movements and different literary publications. However, his angle mainly focused on the avant-garde present in Romania, and not on the international character or the previous occidental or oriental cultural influences rooted in Romanian literature and history. His focus is also different- he zooms in on the complex of inferiority of the Romanian avant-garde to the West and the superiority over the Balkans, without signaling the crisis of identity of the avant-gardists.

### **So what was my approach?**

Since I am following a geographical approach to history, I decided I wanted to visualize the cultural, political and artistic processes around the avant-garde in the form of an interactive map, which spans across space and time, and constantly focuses on Romania, but still keeping a wider view. I am setting up this map in order to show how and why the Romanian avant-garde was in such dire need of its own identity. Therefore, in the first chapter, I wanted to present the avant-garde from a world-wide view, and show the international community of artists which were in continuous communication with the Romanian writers living in and outside the country. Their virtual community was my focus, but I have also integrated the political, cultural/artistic and ideological contexts that have helped crystalize it. In the second part of the chapter, I zoom into my map on a few writers who were exiles, and whose works were impactful on the avant-gardists. The second layer of my map is focused on the historical influences of the East and West in Romanian culture and literature, and their influence on the avant-garde. The chapter also focuses on the interaction between these two major cultural powers, and the lasting effect

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<sup>12</sup> in *Romanian Avangarda Romaneasca si Complexul Periferiei*

they have in shaping the identity of the young Romanian intellectual elite and the avant-garde. The third chapter is a magnified view on my cultural map, focusing first on the literature of the geographical periphery of Greater Romania, and then moving in towards the political and cultural center, Bucharest. This chapter is arguably the most important chapter, because it establishes and analyzes the need for a national identity within the avant-garde, and how the writers and artists tried to achieve it. It's very important to understand that all of the layers of my virtual map are interacting with each other, and that they cannot be understood separately, but only as a whole.

For my main primary sources, I used published material in the prominent avant-garde magazines *The Contemporary*<sup>13</sup>, *one*<sup>14</sup>, *Algae*<sup>15</sup> and *Integral* from between 1923 to 1932. I used *The Contemporary* because it was the longest- running magazine out of all them, *one* and *algae* because they were among the most radical publications, and *Integral* because it was representative of one of the most important artistic currents in the Romanian avant-garde, integralism. It was also an important source for the analysis of the communication between major contemporary avant-garde artists around the world and within Romania. In order to establish the role and influences of the avant-garde within Romania, I have also used texts and publications by contemporary writers (Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian, Panait Istrati and Petru Comarnescu).

I have divided my secondary sources on themes. For concepts and discourses on modernism, I mainly used Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity* and Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of The Avant-Garde*. These books provided me with a necessary understanding of

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<sup>13</sup> in Romanian *Contimporanul*

<sup>14</sup> in Romanian *unu*

<sup>15</sup> in Romanian *Alge*

avant-garde philosophy, theory and implications through the social, cultural, intellectual and political spheres.

For cultural and historical context, Endre Bojtar's *East European Avant-Garde Literature* was the among the most useful comparative study of the cultural and social circumstances surrounding the area.

### **Geographical Terms explained**

In this section I would like to explain what I mean by the geographical terms I will use throughout this paper. The terms of East and West or Occident and Orient go together in my research, because they represent the cultural influences which had an impact on Romanian culture. As Corin Braga explains, "All geography is symbolic in respect to the space it tries to represent, in the same way that all language is symbolic in respect to the things denominated by its words."<sup>16</sup> Using this mentality in my text then, East and West becomes symbolic entities of culture, in addition to physical locations.

The terms of center and periphery offer to the real and symbolic meanings of the words, but also to the interaction between the two. In this work, we will see cities become the cultural centers of the periphery, while the periphery (in this case both cities and nature) can resonate with the center. The terms will also be used interchangeably at times, to attest to the confusion of conceptual entity the idioms were prescribed.

I am subscribing to the specialist Cornel Ungureanu's definition of exiles- which mostly mean Romanians who have been forced out of the country by the political or cultural situation in Romania, both physically and ideologically.

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<sup>16</sup> Sorin Braga, *Psychoanalytical Geography*, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 7, 20 (Summer 2008), p 134

I also write a lot about the idea of an “international community”, which to me represents more than a physical community of intellectuals getting together and discussing ideas, although that certainly happened. An international- or transnational- avant-garde group is, as I understand it, a symbolic exchange of ideas, letters and artistic inspirations, which spans across space and time- because it is entirely possible for a poet like Rimbaud to be part of the community of Romanian avant-gardists writing in the 1920s in Bucharest- and there were many others.

### **Ch 1- Beyond Borders of Space and Time- The Formation of an International Community, Real and Imagined**

In this chapter I will analyze the first layer of the geographical composition of the avant-garde community. The purpose of this chapter is to set up a world view into the cultural map of interwar Europe, with a constant focus on Romania. Here the foundations and dreams for an international elite community have started to crystalize for several reasons- the need for the exchange of ideas between artists, dreams of a globalized state as seen from the left-wing idealists, or hopes of a new, transnational identity for the Jewish artists. While this community was certainly imagined, in order to materialize it, the avant-gardists had to start with changing their society at home, and henceforth, the need and want for a real, integral, wholesome nation has united the artists. My interpretation is that this is the first layer in the avant-garde’s agenda quest for unity.

I would like to suggest that you take this chapter not as a separate work on the influence of the cultural, historiographical and geographical meanings of a transnational scene in Romanian literature, but that this present essay serves as the first layer (out of three) of understanding the connection between space, time, and culture. The later chapters will build onto this one and

many of the names and concepts discussed here will resurface in the other layers, as actors on the national and international stages.

### Exiles

I have included exiles in this chapter first and foremost because they constitute an important stepping-stone to the formation of a transnational community of avant-garde artists. Exiles represent the first intimate connection between the country left behind and the outside world, but also, since they weren't part of a specific community inside Romania, they managed to escape the delimitation between borders. They also bring another unique perspective into the geographical study of the avant-garde, and their view will prove important in understanding some of the artists' search for identity.

I am beginning my account of some of the most important exiles for the avant-garde with writer Panait Istrati, who has been called by Roumain Rolland "The Gorky of the Balkans". His socialist ideology sets the stage for understanding why the global appeal in the search for identity present within the avant-garde. Istrati was, according to Angelo Mitchievici, a universal traveller, a traveller without a country, and with no citizenship: "In Istrati's wanderings, there is no climax, no outcome; the trip can end anywhere and at any time, but it can also go on forever. Every adventure is equal in intensity as the previous one".<sup>17</sup> This image of the previously Romanian-born exile was true until the writer established a residence in the Soviet Union, which he saw as a utopian society. But what drove him away from his country? As literary geographer Cornel Ungureanu puts it in his book *West of Eden*<sup>18</sup>, Istrati was born in a country, and a world even, that wasn't his. He was the bastard of a Greek father who wouldn't recognize him, and never quite felt at home in Romania, always wanting to leave. From the

<sup>17</sup> Angelo Mitchievici, *Umbrele Paradisului*, p 176

<sup>18</sup> in Romanian *La Vest de Eden*

beginning he was drawn to the socialist ideology- “the idea of a world without borders and wars, free beings, a world of dialogue, of communication and of brotherhood, a world in which the man is the highest being”.<sup>19</sup> Ungureanu writes the before even wanting to become a writer, Istrati was a socialist who believed in a new world.<sup>20</sup> After leaving Romania, Istrati set out to Moscow, the capital of his dream-world, but eventually lost faith in the system upon discovering the machinations behind the great slogans and the parades. While his belief in communism as practiced in the Soviet Union shattered, he never stopped writing about Romania and for the Romanian readers.<sup>21</sup> This in itself is thought provoking and testifies to the intellectual atmosphere of Romanian writers of the time. The appeal and quest for a national identity was so strong, and often overpowered other ideologies. Istrati is an interesting case study because in many ways he is representative of the avant-garde artists who never left the country. Many dreamt about a utopian society, but to many, this hope shattered when they got arrested or somehow trapped in what socialism had become.

Samuel Rosenstock’s departure from Romania was perhaps the most impactful for the avant-garde, both international and in Romania. In the second issue of the magazine *The Calling*<sup>22</sup>, Rosenstock writes the poem “*The Storm and the Song of the Deserter*”<sup>23</sup> under the pen name of Tristan Tzara, paying homage to deserters from the trenches:

Light burst from shells  
And lightning cracked in our hands  
Just as God’s hand split into five fingers  
We come up on the troops from behind and cut them down  
We trample corpses left in the snow  
We open a window to the drowned darkness  
Through valleys that sucked the enemy dry  
They have killed them to the distant blue

<sup>19</sup> Cornel Ungureanu, *La Vest de Eden*, p 15

<sup>20</sup> Ungureanu, *La Vest de Eden*, p 15

<sup>21</sup> Ungureanu, *La Vest de Eden*, p 26

<sup>22</sup> In Romanian: *Chemarea*

<sup>23</sup> In Romanian *Furtuna si Cantecul Dezertorului*

Frost: bones splinter, flesh crumbles  
We let our hearts weep.

Why do we slither along the cleft mountain?  
The bellowing storm loosed its lions  
In the riven wood  
The dark wind does not reach the heart's core  
And we wait for the rarefied cimbalom  
Holy singing clear and simple  
Over leprous hills in the gorge  
Like the skull's eyesocket  
We sheltered our dream of the storm  
And someone began to blab  
Down there.

I collected his words-as many as  
Pierced me as werewolves pierce lunar serenities-  
To make you pearls with sharks' teeth  
That stir whirlwinds of ugly dreams  
The eye eaten with rust aims fire  
We enter the muzzle of distance  
And beneath the chain of fort teeth  
The others wait.

It's so dark only the words are shining.<sup>24</sup>

In the environment of an increasingly nationalistic Romania, where even an old friend from the prominent journal *The Symbol*<sup>25</sup> - Theodor Solacolu- proposes that the national ideal should “uphold the belief [...] and the feeling that everybody shares with everybody else, i.e. the invisible dream of an ethnically unified nation”<sup>26</sup>, Rosenstock feels the sting of his ethnic “otherness”, and understands the clear message that he is not invited to become part of such dreams. This poem speaks not only of Rosenstock's empathy towards the deserters, but also of his identification with them, i.e. those who do not believe in the nationalistic and militaristic causes of the early twentieth century. While this is not a difficult conclusion to extrapolate from

<sup>24</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Furtuna si Cantecul Dezertorului”. *Chemarea*, no2. (11 October 1915) p 26-27. Trans. Michael Impey and Brian Swann in *Tristan Tzara: Primele Poeme/First Poems*. New York, New River Press. 1976. P23

<sup>25</sup> in Romanian : *Simbolul*

<sup>26</sup> Theodor Solacolu. “Impresii de Iarmaroc”. In Sandqvist p29-30

his poem, the overarching themes of the *storm* and of the *deserter* have much deeper resonances for the young artist. As he and his work mature over the ensuing years, Rosentock decides to move to Zurich where he is reunited with his close childhood friends, the Iancu brothers. In this way, he “deserts” his family, his country, his ethnic background, any attempt at traditional lyricism and even language, and in a final act of renunciation, his own name and identity.

Tristan Tzara, the final pseudonym that Rosenstock identified himself with, is commonly interpreted as a play on the Romanian language, translating to “sad in the country”. The country that Tzara is referring to is, of course, Romania. However, the word “tzara” can also be translated as “land”, signifying a sadness on a deeper level than simply feeling discontent with the socio-political environment of his country. Tristan Tzara was more than an artistic pen-name, it became, after much effort, the artist’s officially recognized name. His decision to pick this specific pseudonym indicates Tzara’s intense feeling of disconnect with any land or family. He discards of his official name, in a similar manner in which he attempts to discard of his past<sup>27</sup>.

Zurich and Cabaret Voltaire become home for Tristan Tzara and the Iancu brothers, but also for many others involved in the international and Romanian avant-garde, such as Jean Arp, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Victor Brauner, Arthur Segal, Constantin Brancusi, Man Ray, Giorgio de Chirico, Eugen Ionesco, Meier-Graefe, Geo Bogza, Tudor Arghezi, Andre Derain, M.H Maxy , Edvard Munch and the artists of Der Blaue Reiter, Pablo Picasso, Andre Breton, and even Ion Vinea. Vinea’s association with the Zurich group is very important because it establishes a relationship between the artists and Romania. Even though Vinea does

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<sup>27</sup> Baigell, Matthew. Heyd, Milly. Washton Long, Rose-Carol. Jewish Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture: Antisemitism, Assimilation, Affirmation. Tristan Tzara/ Shmuel Rosenstock: The Hidden/Overt Jewish Agenda. 2009. p202

not participate in the events of Cabaret Voltaire, he never loses touch with his school friends, and remains connected through a series of dada letters and dialogues.

In Zurich, as an exile, Tzara thus manages to create a small-scale utopia, a place, or a “land” where he belongs, together with like-minded individuals. These young artists achieve the much coveted “artist-colony”, a place where inspiration flourishes and complementing spirits work together, feeding off of communal energy and creativity.

In order to sustain this new community, the artists create new names and identities for themselves, a trend to which Tzara is no exception. His *Notes Bibliographiques* are part nonsensical scribble, part confabulation, but it is not, in any sense of the word, a true biography. It is “autofiction”,<sup>28</sup> a personal history created for himself and for his colleagues, as a mechanism of integration to a new, “better” society, where the common language is art and ethnicity is irrelevant. The group of artists in Zurich at the time of the Dada Manifesto, then, formed a new nation, in a sense, with a new language, new people, new history, new ideologies and mythologies, as well as communal resources. A society such as theirs, made of artists from everywhere, will become then the inspiration for avant-garde artists in Romania as well.

Marcel Iancu, friend of Tzara’s from Romania and active participant in the dada soirees at Cabaret Voltaire, eventually begins to create thin walls of separation between himself, Tzara and Hugo Ball<sup>29</sup> as the movement becomes more and more shocking, yet more devoid of meaning.

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<sup>28</sup> Baigell, p202

<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that even though Hugo Ball closely worked with Arthur Segal, Samuel Rosenstock and the Iancu brothers, upon first meeting them, he remarked upon their “otherness” and “orientalism”. Furthermore, as a youngster, because of physical similarities to those of Jewish ethnicity, he underwent plastic surgery on his nose as to “avoid confusion”. Baigell, Matthew. Heyd, Milly. Washton Long, Rose-Carol. *Jewish Dimensions in Modern Visual Culture: Antisemitism, Assimilation, Affirmation*. Tristan Tzara/ Shmuel Rosenstock: The Hidden/Overt Jewish Agenda. 2009.

Marcel Iancu then becomes another important artist in exile, in his own right. Alternating between his Romanian identity and the one of an international artist, he is also known as Janco. He goes on to become essential to Romania's intelligentsia, and his architectural work participates in the new revolutionary styles of urban planning of modernism. Downtown Bucharest bears several of his constructivist creations, bringing the Eastern-European city into the ranks of those happy to accept the architecture of the new world. In collaboration with Ion Vinea, Janco organizes and participates in several exhibitions put forth by *The Contemporary*, where artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Arthur Segal, Jean Arp, Victor Brauner, Max Ernst, Rene Magritte, Eugene Ionesco, Bela Bartok, Kazimir Malevich, Vassily Kandinsky, Max Herman Maxy, Kurt Schwitters and many others present their work to the Romanian audience.

### **International community**

When writing, "I, from all the nations, am choosing the imagi-nation"<sup>30</sup>, Ilarie Voronca alludes to one of the most important aspects of the absence of borders when creating art- the creation of an international intellectual and artistic community. In order to strengthen this ideal, there were also constant attempts to collaboration with the avant-garde artists across the borders, which again attests to the desire of a stronger, international community.

The avant-garde, as a concept of time (meaning ahead of time), did indeed apply to the idea of borders. The idea of creating a community outside the limitations of space was as revolutionary as the movement itself, and the tendency towards a united, integral society is evident in the avant-garde texts. Cornel Ungureanu explains that even the terminology of "avant-garde", instead of avant-gardes (since many of the writers had very different and

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<sup>30</sup> Ilarie Voronca, ora 10 dimineata, *unu*, no 006, 1928, p 1

sometimes contradictory ideas) was indicative of the writers' ideologies.<sup>31</sup> For them, the aim was for a globalized, unified avant-garde community within the country, and across borders. Ion Vinea's Activist Manifesto for the youth calls for the unification in thought in order to construct a better country. Employing the pronoun "us", and constantly referring to his readers as a community in which he is included, strengthens his heartfelt appeal.

So why the need for this international scene? The different types of groups of avant-gardists in Romania in the period between the world wars had different agendas. Since the social, cultural and political situation in Romania was uncertain and different groups of artists adhered to different philosophies, they were all in search of new identities, each in their own right. As we will see, some of the writers, especially the ones who contributed to the magazines *Integral* and *The Contemporary*, subscribed to the futurist and constructivist approaches to art, life and culture. Some of the Jewish artists were looking for an identity of their own in a land that constantly rejected them as creative entities or as viable citizens. On the other hand, many of the Jews found an answer in the communist political philosophy and identified with its globalization policy, while publishing in radical magazines such as *one* or *Algae*. Others yet responded by renouncing their identities and became cosmopolite intellectuals, trying to create an international community only bound by imagination, like the aforementioned Ilarie Voronca. Regardless of their competitive identities, the artists were united by their search of a unique identity which was rooted in Romanian literary tradition, which will be further explored in the following chapters.

One of the most important groups which were in need of international communication were the Jewish artists who were discriminated against in Romania. *Integral* magazine, which was the strongest publication in promoting a constructivist transnational characteristic,

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<sup>31</sup> Ungureanu, Cornel. *Istoria Secreta a Literaturii Romane*, 2007. p 391

publishes an article on the Jewish intellectual problem in March 1925. It is a review of the Jewish publications across the borders. The article quotes Albert Cohen, Swiss Jewish intellectual and contributor to *Revue Juive*, as saying, “The Jewish world is in a state of decadence, in a time of resurrection”.<sup>32</sup> And so it was, for very important reasons.

In Romania, the Jews made up a significant part of the urban population, particularly in Moldova. They were also an important sector of the petty commercial and artisan part of the economy. In contrast to the Romanians, who lived in the countryside, the Jews were absent from rural areas and occupations. In 1859-1860, they constituted 3 per cent of the population (almost 9 per cent in Moldova and .4 per cent in Walachia). In Moldova, they made up 47 per cent of the population of the capital, Iasi, 29.7 per cent of the district capitals, 26.2 per cent of middle-sized towns, and 50 per cent of small towns. However, the Jews were only 1.4 per cent of Moldova’s rural population. Also, although only 9,234 lived in Walachia in 1860, almost two thirds of these resided in Bucharest, the recent capital of the united principalities<sup>33</sup>. This meant that for a lot of Romanians who set out to follow their studies and careers in the urban areas, the misconception of a Jewish majority was real, and would later become problematic.

To Romanians, Jews, or the dominant foreigners, were identified with the prototype of the “foreigner”. They were viewed as internal aliens because, unlike the Greeks who were Orthodox Christians, they did not assimilate to the main population’s religion, and also external, because of the “real and imaginary links between the Jewish bourgeoisie in Romania and other countries”, viewed as an international conspiracy.

The ‘Jewish question’ was soon associated with the ‘peasant question’, which was the main problem in the Romanian economical and political life. Just like in Russia and Poland, the

<sup>32</sup> In French: “*La monde juife est en etat de decadence, a la fois, et de resurrection*”, in *Integral*, March 1925, no.1

<sup>33</sup> Livezeanu, Irina. *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building & Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995. p. 193

presence of Jews as leaseholders and innkeepers in the villages was considered to be the cause of the diminishing quality of life in the villages. At this time, the most popular saying and propaganda expression was that the Jews were ‘the bloodsuckers of the villages’ and ‘the sore’ of the peasantry<sup>34</sup>.

This sort of mentality made it necessary for the Romanian Jewry to long for a “land” to which they can feel bound, yet feel free of ethnic prejudices; a land where they could share a common language and common ideals, a land where like-minded individuals work together towards a common goal.

As noted previously, some of the Jewish artists’ involvement in the avant-garde resulted not only in international fame, but also in national disparagement on more than one account, the foremost of which is the “problem” of their ethnicity. Some artists responded either by attempting to hide their “Jewishness” (as in the case of Tristan Tzara) or by retaliating the attacks and participating in the Zionist movement (Marcel Iancu). Many of the Jewish artists, however, were ideologically somewhere in between and engaged in a transnational dialogue of hope for a better society within Romania.

As a result of the time spent in the archives of the interwar *State Security*<sup>35</sup>, historian and journalist Stelian Tanase reports on the avant-guardists who caught the attention of the state and who were later under investigation because of their involvement in illegal clandestine political activities and participation in communist organizations.<sup>36</sup> Tanase writes that most of the accused were participating members to the radical magazines *one* and *Algae*. Among the founding members of the *one* magazine were the radical leftists Geo Bogza, Jules Perahim,

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<sup>34</sup> Volovici, Leon p. 7

<sup>35</sup> In Romanian: “*Siguranta Statului*.” Not to be confused with the Securitate, which was the secret police institution after the implementation of communism in Romania.

<sup>36</sup> Stelian Tanase, *Avangarda Romaneasca in Arhivele Sigurantei*, Iasi, Polirom, 2008, p 33

Gherasim Luca, and Sesto Pals.<sup>37</sup> George Bogza, writer with an agenda and a sense of humor, forms his own creed, like many others had manifestos:

- “I believe in my age, in the attributes of every age, in the duty of the intensification of these attributes
- I believe in the nonexistence of imperative existence
- I believe in the bronze words, echoing in centuries
- I believe in cats<sup>38</sup>
- I believe in the miracle of empty words
- I believe in the absurd
- I believe in the corruption of virgins and flowers.
- I believe in the esthetic horizons opened by psychoanalysis.
- I believe in an ending with imagined shapes, but with anticipated retroactive repercussions of the contemporary soul.
- I believe in sex.
- I believe in screams.
- I believe in galoshes and condoms.
- I believe in the voice of the ancestors insinuated at the flux of the heart
- I believe in the sword of the pen.
- I believe in dreams.
- I believe in a sexual vision of the entire live universe.”<sup>39</sup>

His creed is one of the most representative of the image of a young intellectual avant-gardist, who also has communist sympathies, and as an artist and true modernist, truly believes he can change the world through his literary compositions. Upon reading, one can see that Bogza believes indeed in the power of surrealism and the absurd, the importance of tradition (“I believe in the voice of the ancestors”), but also in the immense power of modernization through literature (“bronze words”, “sword of the pen”). The use of metals in the avant-garde compositions suggests strength and the call for modernization, but it is always contrasted with either nature or some kind of temporal element that reminds the reader of the past. In this case, it is the association with the tradition of the ancestors and the bronze words echoing in centuries. While it is established that he wants to change the world through his writing, the

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<sup>37</sup> Tanase, p 30

<sup>38</sup> I believe in cats too, please see my acknowledgement section.

<sup>39</sup> Geo Bogza, *Creed*, in *one*, April 1929

method is subtle in this text, but still implied. When he writes “I believe in the miracle of empty words”, he could be praising the potential of communist propaganda, or by contrast, critiquing the one of the rightists.

Going deeper into Bogza’s compositions, it can be seen that he promotes a unification of ideologies, done through the metaphorical use of nature. In May 1929, he sends “The Planet with a Fixed Sun”<sup>40</sup> to *one*. Here he writes, “The ravine between us is getting smaller and smaller. We are getting closer. And we mash one close to the other like the fragments of a dish once broken”.<sup>41</sup> While this part can be seen as a romantic declaration, since his text is abstract, it can definitely be interpreted as a wish for better collaboration between ideologies. The title of his composition refers to a planet which is drawn to a sun- which could be interpreted as a globalized proposal for enlightenment.

In this text, and many others, he also writes a lot about blood, which can be seen as a symbol for his political affiliations which were communist, like the red of the blood. Here he notes, “ My undefined thirst is pouring like sand through blood.”<sup>42</sup>, while in a different instance it’s, “The heart is like a brothel with a red light, like the blood at the gate”<sup>43</sup>, and later “from the vase of the flesh, blood squirts like a carnation”.<sup>44</sup> The red of the blood, always in movement, always pouring, always in connection with either nature, the primitive state, or some sort of technological innovation- are what makes Bogza a true representative of the leftist Romanian avant-garde. While his political affiliations are clear, and he was, according to Nastase, under surveillance by the State Police, he was still disguising his words for the sake of his art. I also believe this shows the disoriented sense of his and his colleagues’ political fight within the

<sup>40</sup> in Romanian “Planeta cu un Soare Fix”

<sup>41</sup> Geo Bogza, may 1929, *one*, no.13

<sup>42</sup> Bogza, may 1928, *one*, no.13

<sup>43</sup> Bogza, December 1929, *one*, no.20

<sup>44</sup> Bogza, , December 1929, *one*, no.20

avant-garde, since being so abstract could be indeed poetic, but could signify uncertainty and hesitation in real, physical action.

His colleagues from *unu* and *Algae*, especially Gherasim Luca and Sesto Pals, also adherents to communism, use the symbolism of blood at length, as well. Just like in Bogza's writing, there is a constant repetition of "blood" and variations of "scream", hinting to the need to speak out about the need for unification under the egalitarian values of communism. In *Algae*, Sesto Pal writes,

"Equal earth  
Wild Earth  
Blood: wind [...]  
The blood still screams"<sup>45</sup>

Another example is again from Geo Bogza, in the form of a poem submitted to *one*, in 1929:

"Beyond verse and action  
We will be  
Our eyes will see wonders  
During the day  
Thoughts past the shadow of the stone  
Are screaming your name  
The dead lit up and the blood hearth  
Still cold"<sup>46</sup>

It is clear that the radical avant-gardists used geography as a metaphor for their political views. They believed in connecting all the different segments of society together, under one ideal. Just as industrial workers and peasants were to unite together to create a better socialist society through collectivization and industrialization, the avant-gardists brought together symbols of the earth and technology in their writings.

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<sup>45</sup> Sesto Pals, *Alge*, 1931, no. 5

<sup>46</sup> Geo Bogza, *unu*, 1929, no.19

In the first number of avant-garde magazine *Integral*, Ilarie Voronca writes about the role of other contemporary avant-garde movements in shaping the new Romanian artistic trend: *integralism*:

“Dadaism was virile. Surrealism doesn’t shock. And then the essential: surrealism doesn’t respond to the rhythm of the times. This trait needs to be stressed. It’s the only one that is interesting to us. The dadaist experience, as I’ve said before, was useful. Through this, the modern effort of a laboratory made contact with the mind of its contemporaries.

Cubism, through constructivism, opened a new road and full of life through space. The age of European reconstruction had begun.

Live organisms, figments made in stone, wood, décor, plane, all arose on a bloody land.

Constructivism: abstract order with an harmony of laws and balanced lines, was achieved.

In that moment of fixed synthesis, the disintegration of surrealism could not answer to any necessity. Naïve art, unorganized and surrealist, could not fight with the art massively and manly. At the voice of the *integral century*, surrealism means an absence. Today the time of happenings is here. Poetry, music, dance, all go together as a whole<sup>47</sup> towards a definite and tall train station. Surrealism has ignored the voice of the century screaming: INTEGRALISM. [...]

In regards to the contemporary arts, integralism will hold on bravely. Its gesture is of course, not alone. But in the spectacle of goodbye-surrealism, we will boldly scream one thing: *Integralism is in the rhythm of the epoch, integralism begins the style of the twentieth century.*”<sup>48</sup>

Here Voronca explains the origin of the movement, and its influences. Integralism was the new modernist current, which was there to stay. The most important part of the integralist “manifesto” is its emphasis on all artistic forms and processes, which go together, *integrally*. This philosophy will be stressed by the contributors to the magazine time and time again, and will be central to the idea of unity not only amongst the all the artistic processes in circulation

<sup>47</sup> in Romanian the word *integral* is used here

<sup>48</sup> Ilarie Voronca, *Integral*, march 1925, no.1, p 5

at the time in Romania, but to all the people, and their political beliefs. Thus integralism promoted a united community of artists, from within and outside the country.

Voronca also stresses the differences that the new movement had with surrealism. While in the beginning of his article (not translated here), he explains the merits of the current, he emphasizes the importance of the absence of a temporal constant at the core of surrealism. Surrealism is most of the time influenced by the subconscious and the state of dreaming, which does not have a sense of time. By contrast, integralism was a philosophy and artistic movement which was needed in that moment. It had a definite time, as Voronca put it, and that was the twentieth century.

Voronca also mentions the importance of dadaism as an artistic trend to the formation of integralism. Upon reading many of the compositions present in *Integral*, it is obvious that the artists wanted to some degree to recreate the dada atmosphere in Bucharest. Not only do the works constantly praise Tzara, his works and movement, but even the language used in the works submitted to *Integral* is very ‘dadaesque’, too. Here is just a small sample of the text published: “Dadaism was genius and the destiny of the inventor”<sup>49</sup>, “75 HP<sup>50</sup> died of milk poisoning”<sup>51</sup>, and “A man or dog, or two at once, have the right to urinate at the base of a statue”<sup>52</sup>, so on and so forth. It is safe to assume that integralism was also aspiring to the artist colony that Tzara formed in Zurich, and later Paris. Perhaps the aim was to replicate the utopian society in Bucharest, with the help of the Romanian artists who were under the influence of constructivism, which was an established trend within Romanian modernism by this point (*Integral* first gets published in 1925).

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<sup>49</sup> published in *Integral*, march 1925

<sup>50</sup> another Romanian avant-garde magazine

<sup>51</sup> *Integral*, march 1925

<sup>52</sup> *Integral*, march 1925

Integralism, as seen by the Romanian artists, stands for a united community of people who want to join their efforts to create art. Integralism is also interesting because of the role it plays in the search of a national identity on the part of the artists. While this part will be fully explored in the third chapter, it's interesting to spot the similarities in motifs between integralism and other branches of Romanian modernism. For instance, the return to the primitive, natural state is a motif that crops up everywhere in Romanian interwar literature. This, especially when used in conjunction with the call for modernization, it is a signifier of the confusion and search for identity present within the whole Romanian avant-garde.

“INTEGRAL preaches the essence of primary existence” and “Tradition: the intelligence of the people, free of the eternal natural pastiche- and the technology. Collective imagination has built folk tales, songs, cultures forever viable!”<sup>53</sup> is just a small example of this point. Here the presence of the typical combination found in Romanian modernism- of the confused dichotomy of tradition and modernization- is added the collective element. It is clear that, to the integralists, the perfect way to create art is within the collective. But integralists, by definition, were not exclusive and they collaborated closely with the avant-gardists from *The Contemporary*, as well- what united them was a constructivist attitude to art (and life), and the collaboration with artists from around the world.

So how did the integralists and the others planned to achieve their ideal community? The mere existence of *Integral* and *The Contemporary* and their philosophy attests to the goals of integralism. The magazines were edited in Bucharest and in Paris, and there was constant communication between the artists. They also collaborated with intellectuals all over the world, and often posted the letters and their contributions in the magazines. For example, in 1927, *Integral* publishes a letter from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of the Futurist

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<sup>53</sup> Published in *Integral*, March 1925, no 1

movement<sup>54</sup>, in which the artist greets his “dear Integralist friends from Bucharest”, and also advises that his salutations be published for the whole community.<sup>55</sup>

Both *The Contemporary* and *Integral* used different languages in their publications, thus catering to different groups of artists, and including a broader audience than just the Romanians. *Integral*’s 13<sup>th</sup> number was published entirely in French, while *The Contemporary* also had compositions published in English and German, besides French. Of course the more radical avan-garde magazines like *one*<sup>56</sup> constantly published compositions in a mix of all these languages, and also using different fonts and style- alluding again to Tzara’s collages. In July 1929, *one* publishes such a collage, in both Romanian and French. Not only the languages are different, but so is the meaning.

The magazines also liked to emphasize the philosophy of integralism- that is, incorporating everything- by promoting art from all over the world. *Integral* was among the avant-garde publications to note on the importance of “black art”, as they called it. As Corneliu Michailescu puts it in his composition submitted in June 1925, African art had been previously ignored in Romania, but was worthy of studying, especially because its genesis lies with people seen as “naked, black and shiny, like a freshly lustered boot.”<sup>5758</sup> The avant-garde was drawn to folklore and any elements that reminded them of the “primitive” culture. Therefore, Geo Bogza, in a more radical way, also liked to write about the appeal of the African culture, describing the

<sup>54</sup> I will discuss the influence and connection of Futurism to the Romanian avant-garde at length in chapter 2

<sup>55</sup> in French, the whole quote: Cher Cosma, sequester par d’innombrables occupations, Je n’ai pas encore pu écrire la grande lettre futuriste à mes “cher amis integralistes de Bucarest. Saluez-les chaudement “pour moi en publiant ces paroles dans le numéro dédié au Futurisme”- published in *Integral*, no 11-12, 1927

<sup>56</sup> in Romanian: *unu*

<sup>57</sup> Please note the formulation of this metaphor- again the perceived primitive element of the composition- in this case the African people- is juxtaposed with the modernist element of the shiny black boot, which can allude to militarism and futurism

<sup>58</sup> Corneliu Michailescu, *Integral*, June 1925

ritual involving an African rain dance in one of his poems for *one*, while also reminding the readers about the importance of returning to nature.

The writers in the periphery are also very interesting. They had a dual, and very conflicting role in the avant-garde, which undoubtedly attests to the universal confusion of the time. Some of the provincial artists, through their collaborations, also had a great role in promoting the international spirit of the avant-garde. For example, the artist Hans Mattis, an ethnic Saxon from Transylvania, collaborated with *The Contemporary* and was also part of the Hungarian avant-garde group, *Ma*, which had its own publication<sup>59</sup>. In the western regions of the country, Ungureanu writes, there was a constant collaboration between Romanian and Hungarian ideas: five native writers from Timisoara were also contributing to both magazines. These types of collaborations are great evidence of the fact that ideas do not have borders, and cannot be bound by frontiers.

It is interesting to look at how all of these transnational identities occurred simultaneously on the Romanian avant-garde scene. The political and social uncertainty of the times allowed for so many different ideologies to take shape- and the artists truly believed in the causes they advocated.

Eventually, the founders and editors of *one* magazine- Geo Bogza, Sasa Pana, Stephane Roll, Ilarie Voronca and Victor Brauner abandoned the pen and paper and their dedication to the avant-garde for a more activist approach to the revolution. They became fully involved and dedicated to the communist cause, and thus the production of the magazine *one* ended in 1932.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cernat, p 245

<sup>60</sup> Tanase, p 31

Many of the integralists and constructivists from *Integral* and *The Contemporary* continued their artistic careers, but did not subscribe to the fascist political affiliations to their artistic futuristic leader, Marinetti.

And then, perhaps the most inspiring example of what the avant-garde can achieve in shaping a formerly confused Jewish identity- there was the case of Marcel Iancu. In 1941, after being the victim of many years of persecution and anti-Semitism, he finally immigrated to Palestine and founded Ein Hod, an artist colony that is still in existence today, with a population of approximately six hundred individual. This utopian artist society was a parallel to the *kibbutz* - a society where people live together, work the land together, share the fruit of their harvest, and are self-sufficient. These colonies achieved what Zionist philosophy had been trying to for so many years: a land where like-minded individuals work and live together and foster each other's principles and ideals, and, ironically, "*uphold the belief [...] and the feeling that everybody shares with everybody else, i.e. the invisible dream of an ethnically unified nation*"<sup>61</sup>, as Theodor Solacolu once expressed many years before in the journal *Simbolul*.

## Chapter 2- Caught in Between

*"We are truly in the middle, between two cultures, Orient and Occident, we can raise some sort of bridge, we can ease the communication of values between the West and the East and vice versa; and not only because we are located where we are- In the East but still in the West- but because we are one of the few European cultures to have kept alive certain sources of popular culture and thus archaic "*<sup>62</sup>

-Mircea Eliade

Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential Romanian intellectuals from between the wars, is quoted in Mircea Muthu's three volume work on the impact on Balkan culture on Romanian

<sup>61</sup> quoted in Sandqvist, p 29-30

<sup>62</sup> Mircea Muthu, *Balkanismul Literar Romanesc*, vol III, *Delimitari, Orient si Occident*, p 17

literature, named *Romanian Literary Balkanism*<sup>63</sup>. Eliade's words hint to the intermediary role that Romanian intellectuals took in order to make sense of themselves after such a massive retracing of the country's frontiers.

In this chapter I will analyze the influences of the east and west in Romanian literature, and more specifically in the avant-garde, by looking at prominent writers who contributed to the magazines *One*<sup>64</sup>, *Algae*<sup>65</sup> and *The Contemporary*<sup>66</sup>. I will show how the writers used the constant cultural push-and-pull from the neighbors to help find, create and shape their own identity in relation to their peers across the borders of time and space.

I would like to suggest that you take this chapter not as a separate work on the influence of the cultural, historiographical and geographical meanings of East and West in Romanian literature, but that this present essay serves as the first layer (out of three) of understanding the connection between space, time, and culture. The later chapters will build onto this one and many of the names and concepts discussed here will resurface in the other layers, as actors on the national and international stages.

### The West

In their search for a national narrative and space within the grand avant-garde movement, the artists could not ignore the pull of the west. Paris and Brussels were the centers of the movement which had a largely international character, so it was only natural to try to take cues from their colleagues outside the western borders. The west appears in the avant-garde literature mostly through music, language and philosophy.

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<sup>63</sup> in Romanian "Balcanismul Literar Romanesc"

<sup>64</sup> In Romanian "*Unu*"

<sup>65</sup> In Romanian "*Alge*"

<sup>66</sup> in Romanian "*Contimporanul*"

Petru Comarnescu, although not associated with the avant-garde but a contemporary writer, scholar, literary and art critic, writes about his experiences in United States during his doctoral study there, in 1931-33, at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. His writings are important because they provide critical understanding of what it meant to be a young intellectual in Romania, looking at one of the most impactful western cultural influences, the United States of America. The reader gains insight into the mind of the traveller in his *America as Seen by a Young Man Today*, since is written in the style of a memoir. Comarnescu describes his voyage and psychological state during the whole trip, from his expectations on the boat, to the long lasting memories he has made upon his return. He describes Los Angeles as “magical and fantastical”<sup>67</sup> meaning that it was unreal, and Hollywood is seen as “illusion hill”<sup>68</sup>. However, to him California was still a place which inspired eternal youth, hope and optimism, while in Europe “despair and nothingness were realities of the soul”.<sup>69</sup> Despite being skeptical about America as a cultural entity, neither Comarnescu nor the other young Romanian intellectuals could deny the appeal of the exciting rippling effects it produced.

In the radical avant-garde magazine *unu*, meaning "one", Sasa Pana, its editor, writes about American jazz, quoting French novelist and songwriter Mac Orlan: "The rythm of American jazz bears the speed of the blood which runs in the arteries of the listener and the first rythm because it is the essential rythm of our generation; it charges us strongly, just like an electric current charges drained accumulators."<sup>70</sup> This is just one of the instances in which American jazz is referenced. The works are filled with allusions to the use of rythm, also

<sup>67</sup> in Romanian: “Los Angeles, feeria americana”

<sup>68</sup> in Romanian: “colina iluziilor”

<sup>69</sup> Petru Comarnescu, *America vazuta de un tanar de azi*, p 230

<sup>70</sup> Sasa Pana, "The Revellers". *Unu*, no. 006, 1928, p 3

alluding to Italian futurism. The banjo and saxophone appear to be the designated instruments of the avant-garde.<sup>71</sup>

As expected, American culture was not always regarded as positive, but nonetheless fascinating. In one of his compositions, Pana exposes the frivolities of Hollywood, illustrated through the character of a young student girl who, instead of studying about Romanian history and tradition, studies "the history of Hollywood artists".

French culture has always been deeply influential on Romanians, and it was only natural for French cultural influences to crop up in Romanian culture and literature. Not only were many young Romanians educated in France, but also the French modern culture and politics represented a model for Romanians. Romanians also liked to have their own versions of French artistic publications, like *Revista Albastra* (Blue Magazine) - after *La Revue Blue*, *Versuri si Proza* after *Vers et Prose*, and *Ilustratiunea* after *L'Illustration*.<sup>72</sup>

Rimbaud's philosophy also appears to be very influential in the thoughts of the young Romanian avant-garde artists. In *unu*, he is called "the creator of a new life, the Prometheus of a new faith, and the promoter of avant-garde thought, up to dadaism".<sup>73</sup>

The avant-garde artists were in constant communication with their western counterparts and kept up with their trends and theories. *The Contemporary* has numerous theater reviews of plays popular in Paris, the center for artistic expression during the 1920s and 30s.<sup>74</sup> They also constantly published contributions from artists in the west, especially from France and

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<sup>71</sup> Artists who published in the avant-garde publications constantly mentioned the musical instruments in their poems, and many times alluded to the intoxicating rhythms of jazz. A few examples can be seen in *Algae* no.2 (October 1930), no.6 (July 1930), *one*, nos.5 and 6, 1928, and so on.

<sup>72</sup> Angelo Mitchievici, *Umbrele Paradisului*, p 23

<sup>73</sup> Azar, "18 Carate", *unu*, no. 006, 1928, p 3

<sup>74</sup> Theater reviews were usually on avant-garde plays, mostly from Paris, and served as yet another way to connect to the artist community in France, as well as express ideas for the ones reading at home.

Belgium.<sup>75</sup> These continual collaborations between Romanian artists and their friends and writers across the borders helped contribute to the creation of a veritable international community of the intellectual elite. I will address this very interesting phenomenon in the third chapter.

One of the most influential artistic currents to echo back home was Italian futurism. Paul Cernat writes that futurism was bound to be impactful in Romania because it was a young state which, having started industrialization later than others, was marked by a very visible national identity frustration.<sup>76</sup> While in countries like Poland or the Czech Republic Russian futurism was highly influential, in Romania, it was the Italian one which was very prevalent due to the country's affinity to Latin culture and identity, and the influence of Russian futurism was almost entirely absent.<sup>77</sup> Italian futurist creations such as novels, poems or vignettes appear everywhere in the Romanian avant-garde magazines. In January 1923, for example, *The Contemporary* publishes an article on dramatic aviation in Milan, a review of what was meant to be a play in the sky, in which the planes were the main actors. Not only does the anonymous writer think of this play as one of the highest forms of art, but can identify with the spiritual implications of the movement. He writes, “this art is like dancing, but infinitely superior through the greatness of the scene and the extraordinary dynamic in all three dimensions of space”.<sup>78</sup> In the author’s eyes, not only was futurist aviation art the most perfect kind of art, but

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<sup>75</sup> Modernist compositions from writers like Georges Linze such as the poem *Debut*, published in *The Contemporary* in November 1925, constantly appeared in the magazine and served as a model for the young Romanian artists, as well as a way to keep up with the trends across the western borders

<sup>76</sup> Cernat, Paul. *Periferii Futuriste. Receptarea Futurismului Italian in Romania Antebelica. Avangarda Romaneasca si Complexul Periferiei*. p 83

<sup>77</sup> Cernat, p 84

<sup>78</sup> anonymous, published in *Contimporanul*, *Aviatia dramatica in Italia: Teatrul Aerian*. No. 27. January 1923

also promoted a philosophy which many of the Romanian writers would subscribe to: the idea of free art, offered to “millions of spectators”, and a “great and heroic public school”.<sup>79</sup>

### The East

It's easy to understand how and why the Balkan identity is so important to any cultural study on Romania. Not only the physical location of the country calls for such an analysis, but so does the tumultuous cultural past, in which words such as Byzantine, Ottoman and Balkan have been ascribed a congruent meaning.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the direct influence of the Byzantine Empire along the Danube became stronger, together with religious ties. *The Teachings*<sup>80</sup> of Neagoe Basarab are at the basis of byzantine influence in Romanian culture, Muthu writes. However, cultural associations with the East had soon become negative. Based on the inner workings of the empire, the term Byzantium had eventually become synonymous with corruption and decadence<sup>81</sup>, socially and culturally. After the fall of Constantinople, another layer was added to Romanian culture, eventually becoming integrated as part of the eastern cultural heritage. In light of this, Nicolae Iorga writes, “To us, the Turks are no longer the destroyers of the Byzantine Empire, but its descendants”<sup>82</sup>.

During the interwar period, outside of the avant-garde there have been other works which display Oriental or Byzantine influences. Mihail Sadoveanu's *Brothers Jder*<sup>83</sup> and *The Cancer Sign*<sup>84</sup> are a great example of the pejorative connotations and stereotypes of “Byzantism” in Romanian culture.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> ibid

<sup>80</sup> In Romanian *Invataturile*

<sup>81</sup> Muthu, Vol III, Delimitari, Balcanism./Bizantinism/Orientalism, p 47-48

<sup>82</sup> Mircea Muthu, Balcanismul Literar Romanesc, vol I, p 23

<sup>83</sup> in Romanian *Fratii Jder*

<sup>84</sup> I apologize for the translation- this sounds much better in Romanian: *Zodia Cancerului*

<sup>85</sup> Muthu, Vol III, Delimitari, Balcanism./Bizantinism/Orientalism, p 48

Panait Istrati is another pre-interwar and interwar intellectual representative of *Orientalism* in Romanian literature. Even though his work does not appear in any of the avant-garde publications, he is still considered by many critics to be part of the avant-garde. He publishes a series of works in the style of Arabian Nights, but throughout which, according to Iorga, always maintains his “national specific” writing style. He also writes that Istrati has managed, through his writing style, to create an “appropriated orientalism”, and that “Istrati, a man of the Orient, is not oriental”.<sup>86</sup>

Mircea Eliade is an interwar intellectual deeply entranced by the allure of the East. He never felt at home in Moldova, which he hated because “the literature had no heroism”, so he set out to India, which was his dream land, especially because of his deep interest in Eastern religions. According to Cornel Ungureanu, the greatest achievement of Mircea Eliade was the creation of a spiritual and mystical geography, which will follow him throughout his entire career.<sup>87</sup>

Upon careful revision of the Romanian avant-garde publications, the influence of balkanism cannot be denied. Not only was it part of the inherited cultural history, but also in itself represented an amalgam of greatness, enlightenment, but also corruption and regression. Here is Ion Vinea’s Youth Activist Manifesto, one of the most important pieces of avant-garde literature, translated:

“Down with art,  
For it became a prostitute!  
Poetry is but a winepress to drain the tear gland of girls of every age  
The theater, a recipe for the melancholy of tin can grocers;  
Literature, a stale enema;  
Drama, a jar of powdered fetuses;

<sup>86</sup> Muthu, Vol I, Prelungiri Literare,

<sup>87</sup> Ungureanu, Geografia literaturii române azi, Muntenia, p 138

Painting, nature's diaper, spread at investment salons;  
 Music, a means of locomotion in the sky;  
 Sculpture, the science of butt touching;  
 Architecture, an enterprise of overly embroidered mausoleums;  
 Politics, the job of brokers and gravediggers;  
 The moon, a window to a brothel where the kept mistresses of the  
 banal are knocking, and the rest area for the feeble ones coming  
 out of the art wagons.

WE WANT

The wonder of the new word, full of, in and around itself; the  
 plastic, strict and rapid expression of Morse code machines.

SO

Death to the epic and psychological novels  
 The anecdote and sentimental short stories, realism, exotism, the  
 and the Romanesque should remain the object of skilled reporters  
 (a good daily report today replaces any adventure or analysis  
 novel)

We want theater with pure emotion, theater as new existence,  
 stripped of old bourgeois clichés of the obsession of meaning and  
 orientation

We want the visual arts to be free of emotion as a purpose, so that  
 we aim for integral art, seal of the great epochs (Hellenism,  
 Roman, Gothic, Byzantium, etc)- and the simplification of  
 procedures until reaching the economy of primitive forms (all  
 popular arts, pottery, and Romanian tapestries, etc)

Romania is being built today.

Despite the astounded political parties we seep through the great  
 industrial activist phase.

Our cities, roads, bridges, plants which will be built, the spirit,  
 rhythm and style which will occur, cannot be falsified by  
 "Byzantism", "Ludovicism", which are overwhelmed with  
 anachronisms.

Let's destroy the ghosts trembling with light through widespread  
 disgust.

Let's kill our dead!<sup>88</sup>

In his Youth Manifesto, published in May 1924 in his magazine, *The Contemporary*<sup>89</sup>,

Ion Vinea invites the youth to banish individualism in art and work, while shifting focus on

<sup>88</sup> translation by me, original version in Romanian can be provided upon request

<sup>89</sup> In Romanian "*Contimporanul*"

working together to aspire to the success of the “grand epochs: Hellenism, the Roman, Gothic, and Byzantium” ones.<sup>90</sup> He considers the art of these periods to be all encompassing and whole, which to him is the most important quality. By encouraging the youth to simplify artistic (and not only) procedures in order to reach the “economy of primitive forms”, he touches upon another critical issue present within the Romanian avant-garde which has roots in the Eastern or Balkan discourse- the idea of returning to the natural, even “Barbaric” state, names with which the Romanians have been labeled by the Westerners.<sup>91</sup>

The conflicting statements in Vinea’s manifesto continue with the denigration of Byzantine culture, despite having praised the period’s art just a few lines above. He quickly starts addressing the decadence and depravity of the Byzantines. In Romanian, the second meaning of the word *bizantin* translates to corrupt, which of course goes back to the historical associations of the term. However, the Byzantine culture also means spirituality and knowledge, so one can see that Vinea’s statement is actually very conflicting at its core.

Vinea then accuses the contemporary followers of Byzantine culture of anachronism, which is interesting- and problematic- since the avant-garde itself is also anachronistic. Even more interestingly, his manifesto aims to “kill [the] dead” and annihilate the past. Yet the past cannot be escaped, since just a few lines up, Vinea calls for the adoption of Byzantine values in art.

Vinea’s manifesto is one of the strongest instances in which the duality of the avant-garde is truly shown. While it is clear that the new, young intellectual generation wants absolute and total change towards modernization and forgetting the past, it seems impossible to do so without looking back in time for inspiration. This sort of painful dichotomy becomes more

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<sup>90</sup> Ion Vinea, “Manifest Activist Catre Tinerime”, *Contimporanul*, no.46, may 1924, p 10

<sup>91</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, chapter 7

obvious as one goes through avant-garde composition after composition, only to be swamped by contradictory notions.

In July 1926, Ion Barbu, noted mathematician and writer, writes a poem for *The Contemporary*, featuring a confusing mix of Ottoman themes, elements of nature and modernist symbols. The poem, called *For Isarlâk*, was the ending ton a series of Barbu's creations published in *The Contemporary* and *The Romanian Life*, based on an invented ideal city-state, and dated back a few centuries<sup>92</sup>. Barbu writes the series as homage to the influence of Anton Pann. Isarlak was an imagined city, located at the crossroads of "Good" and "Evil".<sup>93</sup> While the meaning behind Barbu's poetry lies somewhere between surrealism and modernism, it is beyond the purposes of this study. What is important is the style- how and why Barbu used language in his creation. He explores Ottoman motifs in a balad-epic type of creation. At times his verses remind the reader of pagan chants, yet they are also laden with geometrical terms. This duality of new and old, and East and West is significant because it exemplifies the state of mind of many of the avant-garde writers from Romania.

Balkan symbolic and cultural motifs like the use of light crop up within the avant-garde literature. The use of light in some of the poetry takes the reader back in time to the influence of the Byzantines. Muthu writes, "The isomorphism of the notions of light, ray, clarity, wing, purity, etc... universalizes in time and space the experience of light which changes radically the status of the object, opening it up to the spiritual world"<sup>94</sup>. An anonymous submission to the radical magazine *Algae*, reads:

<sup>92</sup> in Romanian "Viata Romaneasca"

<sup>93</sup> Since I did not have access to the magazine *The Romanian Life*, I could not see all the original copies of Barbu's poems. However, several copies exist online from the virtual library site biblior.net, which is the site that I am using to read the works I did not have access to from *The Contemporary*

<sup>94</sup> Muthu, Vol II, Motive, p 162

“All around you the beacons of darkness, breasts with pipes in the nipples, through where light gets in, around you, you have built the circles of green velvet and slopes of light and of poison. An apocalyptic vision on the hills, you light up fires of broken mirrors and over the temples of barbaric prayers you joined your hands in prayer, as if to prepare for new and sacred rites.”<sup>95</sup>

Here the poet clearly invokes a spiritual association through the use of light, and also makes an interesting allusion to the barbaric prayers. Here the link between the East, light and barbarism are contrasted with the modernist imagery of “breasts with pipes in the nipples”. This sort of duality of the integration of old, spiritual tradition and modernization is something that shows up again and again in the Romanian avant-garde, and is indicative of the artists’ struggle for an identity while trying to shed the old ways, but being defined by them, thus leaving them trapped.

But Balkan identity is of course, not the only Eastern influence of the avant-garde. Many of the artists were communist sympathizers, so it was only natural that they looked to Russia for inspiration. But here was the confusion: How can something coming from the East, a place that has been originally associated in their minds and hearts with backwardness and corruption, be an inspiration? Yet it was. Another confusing element for the artists was that one of the core philosophies of the avant-garde, especially apparent in magazines such as *The Contemporary* and *Integral*, was constructivism, which encouraged artists to work together as a community on artistic, cultural and intellectual projects, for the betterment of the society. While it was easy to subscribe to such a powerful philosophy, many of the avant-gardists were conflicted and even more confused about their new role as the vanguards of the Romanian intelligentsia.

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<sup>95</sup> Anonymous, *Algae*, no.1, September 1930

It is also easy to see here the conflicted character about adopting a philosophy from the east. On one hand, for Romanians, the East has always been associated with irrationality, corruption, while the West was catholic, rational, bla bla- use Muthu's delimitari for reference. But now, suddenly, ideas from modernization and political influence come from the east, leaving the cultural interaction between the east and west confusing.

### **In Between**

In January 1923, Arghezi's poem "*Country in Mourning*"<sup>96</sup>, written in 1913, is published in *The Contemporary*. The poem, a symbolical account of the life and adventures of *Fat-Frumos*- the Romanian denomination for Prince Charming-makes a strong impression on the tumultuous political and cultural relationships between Romanians and their neighbors. Since it was written before the First World War, it is important that we note its nationalistic character. Here is just one of the stanza, which really exemplifies the strained relationships between the neighboring countries:

"The morose people from the land that stayed behind  
Sad land, ugly land, hideous and bloody,  
Has threatened the *doinas*<sup>97</sup> of Prince-Charming  
His pride and his goodwill."<sup>98</sup>

The rest of the poem is very similar to this stanza. What is most striking is that this poem, written ten years earlier and under very different circumstances, manages to get published in a moderate magazine such as *The Contemporary*. This attests to the importance the avant-gardists gave to the preservation of national symbols, like Prince-Charming. While the relationships between Hungary and Romania were on the mend, the writers still felt the need to remind their readers of the dangers that lie across the borders. Perhaps they wanted to warn against too much

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<sup>96</sup> in Romanian "Jalea Tarii"

<sup>97</sup> Romanian folk songs

<sup>98</sup> published in *The Contemporary*, January 1923

collaboration between Romanian and either the East or the West, which- as noticed in the previous chapter, was very fruitful, but a potential danger to national unity. Thus, once again, the artists find themselves trapped within the need to define their own identity within the national space.

### **Chapter 3- The search for identity through the creation of a national avant-garde**

This chapter aims to show how the young Romanian writers' tireless quest for identity transformed their cultural scene. This search led to the formation of an even more confused sense of national avant-garde, based on the constant duality between the strength of tradition and the want and need of modernization.

The present essay adds another layer to the spatial analysis of the Romanian avant-garde. While in the first chapters I have explored the cultural connections and eastern/western outside influences on interwar Romanian literary culture, here I will analyze the internal differences which span geographically across the country, from the periphery to the center. The first part of the chapter will show how closely connected the certain geographical areas were to the concepts and philosophies discussed in chapter one, while the second part will show the unification efforts of the avant-garde artists in order to prevent a split identity and create an integral one.

#### **3.1 From Periphery to the Center**

I would like to continue the study begun in the previous chapters- that is, the analysis on the intellectual infusion of the international, occidental and oriental motifs on the Romanian avant-garde- by looking at the literature emerging from the geographical periphery of the newly founded Greater Romania. I will mostly focus on the regions of *Banat* and Transylvania, since they are the most fruitful to study for several reasons. First, since these regions used to be part

of Hungary, the influence and ties with Hungary and a larger, more international community were much more likely to develop. The second reason was the way in which the avant-garde of the periphery addressed the question of national identity.

In the fourth volume of his ambitious geographic anthology of Romanian literature, Cornel Ungureanu describes a story published in 1919 by Camil Petrescu, prominent figure in Romanian interwar literature, in the journal *Banat*. Petrescu's story centers around a conversation between an intellectual from Bucharest and three of his friends from *Banat*. The three men are trying to convince the man from Bucharest to move to *Banat*: "Come with us, sir, come so you can get to know the *Banat* and you'll never want to leave. There you'll see a healthy lifestyle, like the vegetation on mountains. There you'll know hard-working people whose hearts are open like *primitive people*<sup>99</sup>".<sup>100</sup> Petrescu is fascinated with the peasant culture existing in *Banat*, and he is also among the first writers to signal the importance of interaction between villagers and education, and he sees this as an important part of the unification of new Romania:

"There is no doubt that, among all other Romanian peasants, the ones from Banat are the most learned and well-read. Here in Banat people used to open books from the libraries by the hundreds and thousands. Romanian peasantry from Banat has an extraordinary sense of art. We are not only talking about domestic art, but for the most part, for the theater performances held amongst themselves, which fools many into believing they are watching real actors. Also, every village has at least a choir or two, many times conducted by villagers themselves. What our readers want to know is the great number of peasant writers yielded by villages from Banat. Many times I have heard peasant poets reciting their own compositions"<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Please note that here the association with primitive values is a positive one, and that will also be an important factor with the avant-garde.

<sup>100</sup> Cornel Ungureanu, *Geografia literaturii romane, azi*, Paralela 45, Pitesti, Vol IV, Banat- Calatorii. Teritorializari. Programele Resurectiei (1910-1930), p 51

<sup>101</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banat, p 53

It is interesting to note that Camil Petrescu was open about the political implications of his actions as a writer. He wanted to be established as a politician of the newly acquired Banat, and he ran for elections with slogans that praised culture as the builder of the new nation.<sup>102</sup> Camil Petrescu was of course not the only one to write about Banat. Lucian Blaga and Liviu Rebreanu also praised the region for its riches and culture, but especially for its multiculturalism. However, Blaga poses a very interesting paradox: “None of the other Romanian regions has such a diverse, anonymous ethnographic people culture, yet in the same time none of the other regions has yielded such few creative personalities like the *Banat*.”<sup>103</sup> However, that was not meant to say that the region did not yield important cultural achievements, but rather that they were anonymous and collective in their nature, and that was very important for the morale of the new country. To emphasize this point, Blaga describes a scene in a village in *Banat*:

“Here you can find everywhere booming imagination; in the plain or in the mountains, closer or farther from the city, you have the exceptional privilege to partake to a prodigious spontaneous generation of [artistic] form: in songs, dance, poetry, clothes and customs, and in the dizzying diversity of speech”.<sup>104</sup>

So what then, was *Banat*’s cultural role in the avant-garde? How did this incredible ethnic diversity play into the modernist movement? In May 1932, the cosmopolitan scholar Ion-Stoia-Udrea launches the most impactful cultural publication from Timisoara of the interwar period, *The Will*<sup>105</sup>. Here he publishes works like his translations of African American poetry, and here he can also freely express his leftist political inclinations.<sup>106</sup> Stoia-Udrea paved the way for avant-garde writers such as Virgil Birou, whose compositions are inspired by avant-

<sup>102</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banat, p 54

<sup>103</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banatul, p 55

<sup>104</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banatul, p 55-56

<sup>105</sup> in Romanian *Vrerea*

<sup>106</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banatul, p 65

gardist Geo Bogza.<sup>107</sup> An important motif in his works is the confrontation between nature and society. In his “regionalist manifesto” *World Without Sky*<sup>108</sup>, Birou explores a world where society exploits, controls and degrades the human being.<sup>109</sup> His novel centers around the workers of a coal mine, and the impact the diggings have on the human spirit. Birou skillfully makes use of an unfortunate situation to introduce another important avant-gardist symbol, the appreciation for primitive values. The characters assault one another, attack, murder, going back to the animalistic state. Ungureanu notes that *World Without Sky* is a book for the primitive and for the instinctual human, but also about people moving towards industrialized cities, “deteritorialization” and modernization.

Pavel Bellu was another poet who glorified *Banat* in his writings. In some of his verses, he uses the signature avant-garde combination of nature and technology to express the love for his native land, personifying Banat as an “iron angel” who is carrying the weight of the old and future epochs on its shoulders. Thus, by making the plain timeless, he immortalizes it. The importance of the immensity of the *Western Plain*<sup>110</sup> echoes the significance of the *Baragan* Plain, and the triumph of nature over man.

Meliusz Jozsef, Robert Reiter and Franz Liebhart were one of the most impactful poets of Banat in the 1920s. Meliusz Jozsef is described in the magazine *Literary Romania*<sup>111</sup> as “a rainbow of fire between the dadaism of Tristan Tzara and the inventor of the Romanian imagination, Ilarie Voronca, passing through the burning sky of the century of poetry”<sup>112</sup>

Robert Reiter was a writer for the Hungarian avant-garde publication *MA*, but he was also remarked by Lucian Blaga as an important contributor to the Romanian magazine *Miorita*.

<sup>107</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banatul, p 70

<sup>108</sup> in Romanian *Lume fara Cer*

<sup>109</sup> Ungureanu, Vol IV, Banatul, p 72

<sup>110</sup> in Romanian : *Campia de Vest*

<sup>111</sup> in Romanian: *Romania Literara*

<sup>112</sup> Ungureanu, Banatul, p 92

Such collaborations were the norm in the periphery, and show not only the nature of confused identity of the intellectuals on the borders, but the problem of which ideology to subscribe to for much of the newly integrated intelligentsia- the Romanian nationalistic discourse, or the avant-gardist one, which promised to transcend borders and thus unite all minorities.

In his *The Romanian Avant-Garde and The Complex of the Periphery*<sup>113</sup>, literary critic Paul Cernat also emphasizes the importance of the politician and translator Aurel Buteanu, whose presence was mentioned in *The Contemporary* in 1923 and 1924, and where he met Kassak and Robert Reiter, from Timisoara.

An important notation is that most the avant-garde or “radical” literature that materializes in Banat happens during the late 1930s and early 1940s, which is significantly later than the literature from Bucharest, which mostly occurs in mid 1920s.

Cornel Ungureanu claims that after retracing the Romanian borders in 1918, Romania went through a “national Renaissance”. The “union”, as he puts it, (of old Romania and the newly acquired territories) “spiritualizes the Romanian geography, combining metaphysics with the immortal landscapes created by the generation of 1859, the generation of the first “union””<sup>114</sup>. This spiritualized geography is marked by the presence of the *Baragan* plain, the Romanian historical region which has been evoked again and again in Romanian literature and poetry and its meaning has become a geographical synonym for true Romanian identity. The description of nature in literature, its symbolical connotations in the making of national identity- which I will address later- all spring from the landscape of *Baragan*. The works of national writers, poets and intellectuals like Vasile Voiculescu, Ion Pillat, Nichifor Crainic all attest to the importance of this region. The great plain is a “traditional space of Romanian

<sup>113</sup> in Romanian: *Avangarda Romaneasca si Complexul Periferiei*

<sup>114</sup> Cornel Ungureanu, *Geografia literaturii romane*, azi. Paralela 45, Pitesti, Vol I. Muntenia. Ch 7: Reasezari: Geografiile sacre si geografiile profane, p 117

immensity, a possible definition of authenticity.<sup>115</sup> In Voiculescu's poems, a paradise can be built here, and all authors attest to its immensity, making it seem endless, and thus a utopian location. Writer Mihail Sadoveanu, in his stories, uses timeless, untamed animals to describe the inhabitants of the plain- creating a mythical, untainted symbolism around the area, but also alluding to a primordial space. This is what Ungureanu calls the "sacred geography" of the physical space that is *Baragan*.<sup>116</sup>

At this instance, Panait Istrati returns to our cultural map, this time in association with the *Baragan* identity. One the most well-known books from Romanian literature, his *Thistles of Baragan*<sup>117</sup>, explains the story of the identity of the Romanian peasants before World War I. On the historical timeline, the plot of the novel is situated before the Romanian jacquerie of 1907, showing the general atmosphere that lead to it. This is done through the powerful visual imagery of the thistles, which become metaphors for a complexity of feelings: from childhood, to memories, to poverty, fate, boyars, authority, government, subjugators, and, ultimately, death. The thistles are a constant leitmotif in the book. They are chased at all costs along the large, endless steppe of *Baragan*, by Matache, the main character, who decides to follow them in the search of adventures together with the other kids. The thistles become darker and darker through the work, constantly changing the mood of the novel, switching from images of innocent childhood play to symbols of hardships, poverty, and death. The thistles eventually overpower the work, eventually becoming the chasers, a metaphor for the subjugators- the authorities, the boyars, poverty, death, and the sad fate of the poor.<sup>118</sup> Mihaela Albu explains in her article, "*A Romanian Literary Topic- The Baragan Plain*" that one of the main implications

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<sup>115</sup> Ungureanu, Vol I, p 118

<sup>116</sup> *ibid*

<sup>117</sup> in Romanian *Ciulinii Baraganului*

<sup>118</sup> Panait Istrati, *Culinii Baraganului*

of Istrati in his novel is that in the fight between man and the great plain, the *Baragan* always wins.<sup>119</sup>

Besides being a metaphor for the Romanian society at the time, the fact that Istrati's novel is framed in terms of nature and wildlife is highly significant for Romanian literature. Istrati sets the plain of *Baragan* as the inherent stage of Romanian culture, with its good and bad, angels and demons. The great steppe becomes then associated with several other geographical symbols which become critical in defining the Romanian identity – The Danube, Braila (major port city on the Danube), Muntenia (which is more or less the equivalent region of historical Wallachia). Henceforth, the plain of Baragan, geographically, historically and culturally represents Romania. It follows logically then that this region, or at least its connections to nature will play a very important role in the literary compositions of the young Romanian avant-gardists.

An essential part of the identity of the *Baragan* is the Danube, and one of the main geographically symbolic places, Braila. Writer Mihail Sebastian, who, as a young Jewish adult lived in a highly anti-semitic Romania, came to identify himself through his geographical place of birth, Braila, which is on the Danube. He thus embraced his "Danubian" identity, as Alina Chesca puts it. After rejecting his Romanian and Jewish identities, perhaps after being left with no other choice, the writer confessed, "It was in vain that I forgot about my own country, in vain I forgot about old things and I loved new ones, my Danube man soul cannot pass without emotion by a sailboat or by a fishing boat."<sup>120</sup>

The Romanian Renaissance described by Ungureanu also centers around *Baragan* and the idealized life of the wildlife. This came in contrast, and at the same time an addition to, the

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<sup>119</sup> Albu, p 12

<sup>120</sup> Alina Beatrice Chesca, Mihail Sebastian- A Danubian Romanian or The Writer's Triple Identity. Journal of Danubian Studies and Research, vol 2, no 02, 2012, p 3

concept of the “mioritic space”, introduced by poet Lucian Blaga, with which Romanians have traditionally associated themselves.<sup>121</sup> Blaga saw the Romanian lands, the *plai* (the slope of a hill that consists of meadows- so the opposite of the plain) as tightly connected with Romanian ideology. Folklore praised the land and the animals that populated it, so, therefore, to Blaga, the land itself became equated with “the infinitely undulating horizon of hill and valley” which formed “the spiritual substratum of the anonymous creations of Romanian popular culture”.<sup>122</sup> There is no surprise, then, that Blaga felt that Romanian spirituality, closeness with the land and with the history, is best exemplified in the rural areas, where these folk tales, histories and arts are more prevalent than in the urban setting, and where it is more difficult to forget one’s ultra-Romanian childhood and beliefs and exchange them for cosmopolitan ones.

The emptiness of *Baragan* then, utopian and ready to be filled with new concepts, thoughts and ideologies, can be contrasted with the folk-tale and tradition filled *plai*, adding on the the geographical dimensions of the Romanian space.

Because of the necessary interaction between the physical space and the cultural symbols associated with it, Ungureanu then could be alluding to the necessity of having a physical place as part of the “national Renaissance” identity, perhaps like Florence to the Italians, although slightly less ostentatious and instead focused on the pure, unadulterated sights of the countryside.

But in the Romanian avant-garde, the culture of the countryside seeped into the city. Bucharest was a very important physical, cultural and symbolical center of the avant-garde. Artists inspired by the “spiritual geography” of the countryside wrote and published their compositions in Bucharest. This was the center for all four avant-garde publications, but also

<sup>121</sup> Mihaela Albu, A Romanian Literary Topic- The Baragan Plain, *Philologica Jassyensia* issue: 2(VI) / 2008, p 9

<sup>122</sup> Hitchins, Keith. *Studies on Romanian National Consciousness*. Rome: Editrice Nagard Foro Traiano. 1983. p. 244

for other intellectuals and artists. Bucharest was called “the little Paris”, because, like its greater counterpart, was brimming with intelligentsia and modernist ideas.

One of the ways in which the tradition and folklore associated with the countryside merged with the new modernist ideals of the avant-gardists, was through the architecture of the city. Besides of the contributions of Marcel Iancu, Horia Creanga was one of the most prominent modernist Romanian architects. In her book *Romanian Modernism: The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940*, Luminita Machedon quotes Creanga his fellow colleagues’ theory of modernism combined with old Romanian folklore elements and vernacular architecture:

“But what is our identity in architecture? No matter how patriotic and respectful we are of the old art, the identity of our architecture cannot be sought in the lacework at Horez, in the twisted towers at Arges, and the golden decoration at Trei Ierarhi. It must be sought elsewhere, where many think of seeing it- in the modest Romanian *cula* with its simple geometric form. On looking at the shape of the *cula*, which of you would still declare that the architecture I am speaking of is finished with the past? Unlike what is happening in our country, the new concepts and styles that identify Western Countries- Flemish, Gothic, Renaissance- show an abrupt divorce from tradition. Our modern architecture springs from the general needs of the time and not from the pleasure of imitation. So, it is not about a style but about a concept prompted by the necessities that live through millennia; it is not about a style, for styles are perishable, it is about the architecture of a simplicity that is lasting”<sup>123</sup>

Creanga’s statement, originally made in a paper he wrote for the Conference of the Association for the Town Planning of Bucharest, is one of the few he actually made about his architectural style and its meaning. Since he was in charge of planning some of the most important building of modern Bucharest, Creanga chose the style he saw most fit for the new identity of the new capital of the newly formed country (Greater Romania). But the style could not be all new. In the manner of the avant-garde, he wanted to combine elements of the old *cula* (which he calls Romanian in its simplicity, but which has Ottoman and thus a Balkanic identity

<sup>123</sup> Horia Creanga quoted in Machedon, *Romanian Modernism: The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940*, p 53

of its own) with the new ideas of simplistic and functional architecture. Therefore, his modernism would embody a new identity, a reformed tradition. This type of architecture was imperative because, as he puts it, it sprang “from the general needs of the time”- which were of course, the crisis of identity that the whole country was experiencing, and which the avant-garde, as the “vanguard” of intellectual concepts and the standard bearer, had the duty to fix; at least this is how the situation was perceived by the modernists.

As mentioned previously, the periphery was definitely looking at the avant-garde from Bucharest for guidance and inspiration. But the center was also gazing towards the modernism of the borders. In his poem “The Almanac of Angels”<sup>124</sup>, Ion Vinea writes “Province, what soul are you devising in such a summer? Feel, better yet, how ghosts of lilies grow in your shadows”<sup>125</sup>. In his poem, it is clear that the writer, hailing from the concrete buildings of Bucharest, is idealizing the periphery. One can see that there was a sense of confusion- or perhaps to sound more poetic- an idealized sense of perfection- as to what the avant-garde was meant to do. According to the artists, the avant-garde had to incorporate symbols of nature, the wild, but also tradition, folklore, while in the same time bearing the duty of carrying the standard of modernization.

The most important overlapping symbols of the avant-garde from both the periphery and the center are the immensity and superiority of nature, the admiration for peasant values and culture, and appreciation for primitive culture. It’s clear then that the influence of the geographical spaces of the plain of Banat and Baragan, Braila, and Danube are so closely connected with nature and the Romanian literary tradition, and reflect in the art created in Bucharest. Whether the avant-garde was going to construct or deconstruct their identity, these

<sup>124</sup> In Romanian: “Din Almanahul Ingerilor”

<sup>125</sup> I apologize for this translation, it’s infinitely more beautiful in Romanian: “Provincie, ce suflet urzesti in asa vara?-Simte, mai bine’n umbrati cum cresc naluci de crini”

spaces were essential. There would have been simply no national or Romanian identity without their appeal. However, in the next section I will analyze the unique way in which the artists introduced the use of these geographical marks as part of the quest of their own space in the Romanian society, the artistic world, and as part of the young generation of intellectuals.

### 3.2. A National Avant-Garde

“1. The idea of beauty in art is prejudice.[...]

7. The art of children, popular art, psychopath art, the art of the primitive people are the arts that are most alive, most expressive, coming from the deep, organic, without the need for aesthetic culture

8. Primitive people do not make primitive art.

9. In art there is no primitivism, there is no scale of development. The romantics of last century had the opportunity to poison, through the didacticism which was developing back then, the mind of the succeeding generations with the romanticism of the Greek ideal aesthetic.

10. Gothic, Assyrian, Romanic, Chaldean, Indian, Persian, Egyptian, Etruscan- are arts with much stronger repercussions on the human soul than classicism. They are totally unknown even by critics and artists. [...]

12. Technique has nothing in common with virtuosity and artifice.

13. Art school, how it is practiced today, kills imagination, and promotes prestidigitation, virtuosity, morals, side qualities.

14. Sensitivity stems from ourselves like the nail from the skin.

15. Sensitivity is always the same unique constant in the creation of art in time and space.

16. Folklore art: the strongest examples of the standard of sensitivity. The axe always creates a tabula rasa.

17. The new art aims for sensitivity through any means possible”<sup>126</sup>

-Marcel Iancu

April, 1924. The birds are singing, the flowers are blooming, and the avant-garde in Romania is thriving. The literary movement is in its full swing, and several magazines, radical or moderate, have plenty of material to publish. The artists know what they want, or so it

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<sup>126</sup> Marcel Iancu, *Insemnari de Artă*, *Contimporanul*, april 1924

seems. In this cultural climate Marcel Iancu writes his “Art Notes”<sup>127</sup>, which get published in *The Contemporary*. His notes are the thoughts of the artists of the new generation. They call for the destruction of traditional art, but also for the return to the past for art that has been previously ignored, or considered inferior to the classic model of aesthetic before emotion.

In this section, I will explain the attempt to the creation of a national identity, by constantly returning to the Iancu’s Art Notes and bringing examples from the other artists.

Iancu’s first few notes deal with the importance of accepting the primitive as an equal or superior element of the artistic process. “Primitive people do not make primitive art”, he writes, perhaps alluding to the perception of the Romanians (situated, as explained in Chapter 2, in the barbarous, primitive Eastern Europe). The assumption here is that Romanians should renounce the stigma of backwardness of the East and proudly embrace the modernist artistic explosion coming particularly from these “primitive people”. He also invites the readers to contemplate the marvelous achievements of the downtrodden and perhaps forgotten artistic styles of the past. While the world has been focusing on the ideal and aesthetic of Greek art, Iancu points to the intensity and emotional superiority of the art that art history has discarded- that of children and psychopaths. He claims this art is more primitive, more organic, and therefore the most real out of all the other ones. This is important because willingly or not, the Romanians usually classified pejoratively with the Eastern discourse, needed encouragement, as well as a sense of their own identity, while trying to create “high art”.

Vinea’s Youth Manifesto of May 1924 also calls for the use of “primitive forms”, which he describes as the Romanian folklore arts, pottery and making of traditional tapestries. At that point, he writes, “Romania is being built today”.<sup>128</sup> This is a very clear instant in which one of

<sup>127</sup> in Romanian “Insemnari de Arta”

<sup>128</sup> Ion Vinea, “Manifest Activist Catre Tinerime”, *Contimporanul*, no.46, may 1924, p 10

the most prominent avant-garde writers, the editor of the most well-known and long-lasting avant-garde magazine in the country, specifies the scope of his movement- for Romanians, the avant-garde was a push for unity and the determination of national identity.

The writers quickly realized that a very powerful way to try to identify with a unique national avant-garde was by using symbols perceived as “Romanians”, which had many cultural connotations for themselves and their readers. However, they weren’t just writers, they were avant-garde writers, modernists, and wanted that philosophy reflected in their compositions. They needed their own space within a newly formed confused society, which was also in search of an identity.

The desire to return to nature has been a strong motif in the avant-garde compositions. However, most of the time nature wasn’t standing on its own- its elements were always combined with technological terms, or symbols of modernization- like steel. In almost all of the compositions submitted to the avant-garde magazines that I have analyzed, one can see the dual association between the need to go back to nature and the need to modernize.

But what about the interest in the art of children? As Marcel Iancu puts it, such art was regarded as more pure and more expressive, and therefore more pure than any other type of art. Also, it is important to note that children are perceived as the molders of the future, and it is no coincidence that the modernists look at them for hopes and inspiration for a new identity- as Iancu puts it, a *tabula rasa*.

In the fifth issue of *Algae* magazine, Fredy Goldstein publishes an article about a 6-year old child named Fredy Goldstein. According to the author, the child, while at the age where he was learning to count up to ten, was able to sing incredible hymns and recite amazing poetry. He writes: “I walked through the perfects to look for the deep meaning of the words, I thought I was dreaming, that my eyes were pouring out- still Fredy Goldstein, the child about to turn 6,

was talking to the angels and I was only a beaten down dog who only knows how to cry and to write”<sup>129</sup> Here the author, who signs his own name as Fredy Goldstein, is showing admiration towards the 6-year old version of himself, who was much more pure and innocent and because of that, had the ability to talk to angels.

The avant-garde also liked to use the appeal of folk stories with symbols perceived as national and signifiers of a national identity, in order to appeal to children. Folk stories had characters such as the Romanian Prince-Charming- but many times he was associated with less heroic situation than one might think. In the same time, the classical literary mold of a folk tale was used for the compositions of avant-garde folk tales, which were many times abstract, cynical, and of course contained the typical avant-garde combination of the pull of the old and the push of the new.

In chapter one, I have already discussed the meaning of blood in association with the artists who were communist sympathizers. But the portrayal of blood in the avant-garde is very interesting. Besides its link to communism, the presence of blood in a composition can be an allusion to going back to nature and joining the other elements. It can also hint to the “Barbarian” identity that the East is so many times linked with, or it can be the symbol of a real or imagined fight. I have no doubt that blood, in connection with the avant-garde, really had many of these associations. But while the meaning and usage of blood may sometimes be more important than others, one thing is clear: blood was one of the main motifs, and its literary use helped unite many of the writers. Here is an example of a poem in which blood is used poetically as a symbol of Romanian consciousness:

“Through blood I measure myself [...]
   
A voice in the wind and the wind has defeated us [...]
   
And for song and blood and love

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<sup>129</sup> Fredy Goldstein, *Alge*, no 5

And now I'm leaving to laugh in the abyss"<sup>130</sup>

While the meaning of blood in this poem is not clear, the reader can clearly understand the pain of the writer, can feel how, metaphorically speaking, his pen bled onto the paper while he was trying to express his woes- being trapped, without a real assigned space, in the abyss.

### Conclusions

The avant-garde, as a concept of time, can be studied within its own philosophical dimension, but what fun is that? Newtonian law dictates that absolute time and space go together, but the avant-garde aims to defy that by constantly conceiving laws of creativity that push time before space. However, that creates a problem for artists ahead of the threads of time who try find their own space within the society they live in. Whether the search for an identity within their social context will yield results or not, is not important. They are the avant-gardists, the standard bearers, the illuminati, and they have to try by all means.

This is the sort of philosophy that the Romanian modernists followed in the years between the two world wars. They found themselves in a society that was drastically different from the situation before the war- the country has expanded, the borders were retraced, and many other minorities had joined the cultural "melting-pot", each bringing their own ideologies to the mix. This only strengthened Romanian nationalism and chauvinism, and left many of these artists wondering how they can create their own identity, worthy to follow.

The Romanian avant-garde is not a simple subject to study. While it has been thoroughly explored by scholars, few have ventured into the study of avant-garde and the importance of situating it into the dimension of geographical space. But, as I hope I have proved throughout this paper, such a study is imperative to the complete understanding of what

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<sup>130</sup> D. Amprent for *Alge*, no.5

was going on with Romania at the time, not only within the avant-garde, but as a reflection on the entire society.

I used three alternating dimensions of space to prove how in each and every one, the artists tried to look for a space to call their own, but were constantly falling within their own webs which they were trying to cast away. Themes like modernization versus tradition, primitive versus advanced art, center versus periphery- all merge together in a cultural map that keeps zooming in on different levels. Each and every time, the artists have stumbled across concepts they were trying to escape, making their search more confusing, and a new, untainted identity impossible to attain.

During my research I have of course only explored the literature dimension of modernism. While literature can and has been studied as its own branch of the movement, many of the avant-garde magazines included illustrations with their texts, and I think it would be very interesting to employ a comparative study of image and text in future research regarding the geographical meaning of the avant-garde in Romania.

I also think that including more magazines could bring more depth to an extensive study. Here I have included four of the most prominent avant-garde publications which were indeed representative of the movement and served my purpose well. However, the artists also published books, and there have been other marginal magazines that could offer more insight into this study.

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