

## Book reviews

### REVISITING THE AVANT-GARDES

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**Abstract:** *The tome written by Paul Cernat, a known specialist of the avant-gardes, analyzes the anatomy and human blueprints set out by the Romanian and European avant-gardes found under the immediate influence of the symbolic year of 1933. The “amphibian” nature of these radicalisms is characteristic for an entire process of modernization. That is why Paul Cernat critically revisits all of the marquee and obscure cases, offering us a critical panoramic view that invites novel re-assessments. The studies are written using a blend of tools you might see a literary historian and a portraitist wield in their work, a blend that lets shine truly special expressive abilities, and qualities in terms of synthesis. Whether tackling famous names, household figures from around the world – such as Ionescu and Blecher – or discussing the work of more provincial or minor writers, the author withholds from us no memorable quote. An essential study for those interested in the phenomenon of the Romanian avant-garde.*

**Key words:** Romanian avant-garde; radicalism; re-reading; surrealism; absurd;

The first chapter, *Căderea în modernitate (Falling into Modernity)*, focuses on Eminescu’s destiny in the group Junimea [The Youth] as a form of nihilistic avant-garde. What we know for certain from reading this section is that Paul Cernat always exhibits more conceptual possibilities than the subjects he chooses. I would venture to say that his subject matter is always beneath his critical level. If he were to use these leanings to approach a major literature, he would certainly enjoy a more notable level of success.

The poet Eminescu, accepted in this group of young intellectuals who had spent their formative years getting educated in Western schools, finds in the attitude of critic Titu Maiorescu (1840-1917) – the head of the group – a measure of snobbery towards the spirit of the times; Paul Cernat is interested in the fact that Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), considered a Neo-Romantic, uses the term “nihilist” for the new literary school of thought; Maiorescu wasn’t just a conservative critic, but also proved to be a nihilist in disguise as

well. The researcher is interested here not in the avant-garde, but Junimea's relationship with the nihilistic spirit. He believes that the term used by Eminescu comes from an intuition that surpasses the poet's intentions. We can identify in the poems of Eminescu, for example, a sort of disenchantment of poetry, a notion that is in step with the pessimism of Schopenhauer and the nihilism of Nietzsche. Cernat tends to believe that, in the poem *Epigonii* (*The Epigones*), a famous work in Romanian culture, Eminescu did not adhere to the theories of Titu Maiorescu, but satirized Junimea and its forms which were devoid of real content. Maiorescu established Eminescu, who was joined Junimea with the great writers of the time – Slavici, Creangă and Caragiale. On the other hand, Alexandru Macedonski accused the linguistic trivialities and the barbaric Germanophile manner in which Eminescu operated; as a matter of fact, as a Neo-Latin adept opposed to Germanism, Macedonski was at the starting point of a new direction for the beginnings of the Romanian avant-garde, the one that was represented by “aesthetic Francophilia” against Junimea (the other direction was socialist and belonged to Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea).

Chapter two, *Dada export-import*, begins with an applied study retracing the history of the Dadaists. The emphasis rests on the preoccupations of Tristan Tzara, whose pursuit of a theory of de-legitimization sought de-provincialization – to topple fixed, traditional values and to desert a world ruled by war and technology. Let us not forget that the World War reached its massive scale, unprecedented in history, because the technological growth of the arms industry made it possible. Dada was a movement, Cernat believes, that was trans-national and anti-nationalist in nature; like all of the pacifists of that time, its members perceived war as a product of Western bourgeoisies; on the other hand, Tzara's origin and education were held against him, as they had nothing to do with German humanism, as the other leaders would have preferred. Cernat uses numerous direct and critical sources to retrace the image of a group whose legacy was hard to follow in Romanian culture. Beside the Dadaists, the “De Stijl” movement and their artistic revolution are there in the Romanian avant-garde publications. The similarities between poet Ion Vinea's manifesto and the manifesto in the magazine “De Stijl” are “striking,” the literary historian believes. We can, thus, speak of an impure Constructivism, “hybridized with Imagism and Futurism” within the Integralism specific to the magazine that gave it its name in Romania. The architectonic and plastic achievements are essential, and the ideatic relationship with the “De Stijl” group is obvious.

An extremely applied and useful demonstration is carried out concerning the progressive revolutionary nature of the historic Romanian avant-garde of the 1930s. The fact is that the French drama of Ionesco, for example, explicitly hails from I.L. Caragiale and Urmuz, while the

“buffoonish nihilism” of *Nu (No)* stems from “the carnivalesque relativism of Tzara’s manifestos”. The novel was contested by the generation of Ionesco, Cioran, Eliade and the rest because it represented an expired form of bourgeois positivism – an idea borrowed from Futurism. Cernat precisely explores the young representatives of the time, paying attention to the Futurist influences, ideological conflicts and nuances in the polemics of ideas.

Chapter four shows how the revelatory experiences of Ilarie Voronca and Geo Bogza changed the face of Romanian poetry. Voronca serves up the most spectacular images of the modern metropolis in Romanian inter-war poetry, prophesying the release of the sentence from the constraints of logic. When analyzing the poems and recounting the literary context, Cernat displays an archivist’s conscientiousness. Bogza, on the other hand, writes a very transnational poetry. Cernat directs his interest towards the most famous tome of the Romanian inter-war avant-garde, *Poemul invectivă (The Invective Poem)* by Bogza. Bogza has probably hoped for nothing other than to change the reader. Poetry must transform the reader on the inside, and the method or means for achieving this transformation were obvious (shock, aggression, reportage poems, etc.). Just as spectacular, through Cernat’s lens and penmanship, are the journalistic and prose books of Bogza. His famous prose book *O sută șaptezeci și cinci de minute la Mizil (One Hundred Seventy-Five Minutes in Mizil)* is also analyzed in detail, seemingly becoming the ideal ammunition for the hermeneutical Cernat.

Chapter five, dedicated to the Romanian surrealists of the 1940s, brings forth names that are slightly more obscure, such as Jules S. Perahim, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Virgil Teodorescu and D. Trost. While some migrated out of Romania in time and saved themselves from totalitarianism, others, such as Teodorescu, collaborated with the communist power. Aurel Baranga, although a talented and promising avantgardist, became the servant of the regime after 1945. The last great Romanian surrealist, Gellu Naum, seems to Paul Cernat to be living all ages at once. And Cernat is right.

A separate chapter is dedicated to the lone avant-gardists. The author draws up a few historical-literary sketches, always searching for a synthesizing memorable phrase, akin to a G. Călinescu. The names of the heretics from the various iterations of the avant-gardes are also present here. In these analyses, Cernat portrays these poets and times with an unabashed intent to render them in a definitive fashion, as if to compile a dictionary. There are joyous and ironic biographies, all of them well weaved with intelligent expressions.

The last part is spent developing a veritable micro-monography dedicated to Max Blecher, starting from the latest research, critical editions and re-interpretations of the oeuvre of this famous Romanian Kafka. Cernat

believes that there is always more to the prose of a writer who makes of the twilight zone of their own life a true hypnotic spell. On the subject of Eugen Ionescu, the researcher remarks the Balkan tradition with its air of fantastic realism sourced from folklore. I would venture to say that Paul Cernat seeks to extract exotic formulations even in the most depleted of subjects by using, for this purpose, even a few guilty comparisons.

When reading his interpretations, you get the impression that there is nothing left to be understood. Most certainly, Cernat's critical devotion exceeds even the expectations of the authors.

In the book *Vase comunicante*, the researcher does not debate literary history issues with a general approach, but is rather more detail-oriented, thus moving reception to areas that are completely new and remarkably fertile for those who will analyze the literary phenomenon of that time from now on. Along with Ion Pop, he is the most versed researcher of the Romanian avant-gardes. But unlike any other specialist on the avant-garde, Paul Cernat is a critical source of memorable verdicts. *Vase comunicante* is the most Călinescu-esque tome that bears the name of the Bucharest academic. Beside the other studies on the avant-gardes, this one confirms that Paul Cernat is a European-level specialist and, at the same time, the most gifted critic of his generation.

#### References:

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