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## THE POETICS OF ROMANIAN AVANT-GARDE MANIFESTOES

**Abstract:** This article intends to examine the avant-garde manifestoes that were written during the period in which the historical avant-garde movements were active in Romanian literature. We choose to operate with the phrase *historical avant-garde* in this study because the Romanian avant-garde movements have manifested themselves in a rather fixed period of time, namely in the interwar period. It is during this period that the most important Romanian avant-garde manifestoes were written. At the same time, this paper aims to analyze the manner in which the avant-garde manifestoes more often than not tended to be stylistically contaminated with the individual poetics of each author that signed such articles. The main focus of this analysis is to determine if avant-garde manifestoes can be viewed as literary genres, in the sense that they can be considered as autonomous forms of art in the context of the historical avant-garde movements.

**Key words:** historical avant-garde, avant-garde manifesto, stylistic contamination, poetics of manifestoes, literary genre.

### *Historicizing the Avant-garde. Rupture vs. Continuity*

To analyze the Romanian avant-garde movement as historical, in the sense of an artistic movement that has already established its cultural position in the history of art, is fundamentally necessary in order to better understand its critical reception. This perspective also leads to a change in perceiving the avant-garde not by endlessly filtering the ever-changing rigours of the literary canon, but rather by

attempting an investigation based on context and adapted to a system that is analyzable by means of literary theory. Such an approach is not only needed, but also unavoidable, as Peter Bürger better puts it:

“Aesthetic theories may strenuously strive for metahistorical knowledge, but that they bear the clear stamp of the period of their origin can usually be seen afterward, and with relative ease. But if aesthetic theories are historical, a critical theory of art that attempts to elucidate what it does must grasp that it is itself historical” (Bürger 1984, 15)

Perhaps the most compelling debate associated with the avant-garde today is the one that concerns it being either a rupture in the evolution of modern art or a continuity in the progression of nineteenth century art. It would seem that the dominant trend is the one that follows Eugène Ionesco’s idea of avant-garde, one of “opposition and rupture” (Ionesco 1992, 66). According to Mario De Micheli, modern art came to be after a crisis emerged from the so-called “historical and cultural unity of the bourgeoisie from 1848” (De Micheli 1968, 13). This will also give birth to the first manifestation of the avant-garde in nineteenth century’s Europe. What is most important in these early avant-garde works, as De Micheli states, is historical motivation:

“The historical reality becomes *the essence* of the work of art, through the creative power of the artist, who, by betraying history itself, managed to highlight its values. In other words, the reality-content, acting with its all-powerful impulse from within the artist, also determined the physiognomy of the work of art, its form” (De Micheli, 17).

Thus, the social climate change after 1848 led to an awareness of the close relationships between society and art. It should be noted that this is a time where the doctrine of “l’art pour l’art” began to seem contradictory to the newly emerging creeds and the now-dominant zeitgeist. The subsequent manifestations of art, and especially the avant-garde (which manifested itself, in late nineteenth century, predominantly through painting), would bear the markings of this new spirit of the

age, by which they saw a decisive, vivid new reality. For these reasons, we deem it necessary that we see the avant-garde as a rupture, and not as a continuity, or rather a continuity of ruptures, but nonetheless, an art movement that manifested its programme in a most radical way.

Starting with the twentieth century, we can begin to speak of a historical avant-garde. There are numerous debates regarding the historicization of the avant-garde, starting from the prime meaning of the term itself (which is a military term that designates small “shock troops” used to infiltrate and attack the enemy’s vulnerable rear areas). And while the metaphor is in itself significant, Matei Călinescu does argue that by the term’s logic, there could not be a historical avant-garde (in the sense of a historically established one):

“Logically speaking, any artistic or literary style should have its own avant-garde, because nothing is more obvious than to consider the avant-garde artists as being ahead of their time conquering new forms of expression to benefit the following generations. But the history of the term, in its cultural meaning, demonstrates quite the contrary. The avant-garde does not herald a new style, it is in itself a style, or rather an anti-style” (Călinescu 2005, 122)

As subsequent artistic movements evolved from the avant-garde (such as the surrealist movement of the '50s or postmodernism), it became more and more difficult to define the avant-garde. This is relevant because we can no longer simply assign terms such as opposition and rupture to speak of the avant-garde in a cultural space that is inherently permissive towards artistic experiments and in which the insurgent rhetoric can no longer have the same devastating effect it had in the period of the historical avant-garde. The next sections will serve as conceptual boundaries that made the avant-garde movement unique in the history of art. We will also analyze the main features of the Romanian literary avant-garde, in order to better understand its artistic programme.

### *The Avant-garde and the Negation of the Autonomy of Art*

In order to better operate the concept of historicity in art, we must first establish the coordinates of art as an institution. The main factor that legislates the

transformation of art into an institution is, without a doubt, the canon. As Bürger explains:

“The concept of *art as an institution* as used here refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works” (Bürger, 22)

Jochen Schulte-Sasse, in the preface to Bürger’s essay, observes that the institution of art was perceived as such only after there was an antithetic stream of thought to contest it:

“The category *art as institution* was not invented by the avant-garde movements. But it only became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society” (Bürger, 7)

The avant-garde brought about the transformation of art into a social subsystem, and by doing so, the criticism of art became a criticism of society itself:

“With the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society” (Bürger, 22)

Nineteenth century art is one of aesthetic autonomy and of the “art for art’s sake” slogan, by which it constantly refused social involvement. The avant-garde is essentially a movement that wishes to re-integrate art in what Bürger calls “the praxis of life”. It rebels against the detachment of art from the context of real life and from its correlative crystallization of the aesthetic. If bourgeois art established its autonomy through Aestheticism, an inherent category that determined artistic value, then what the avant-garde applied to Aestheticism is what in Hegelian terms is called sublation, by which art was simultaneously destroyed and then preserved in the praxis of life. Paradoxically, however, the avant-garde assimilates the part of

Aestheticism through which it alienates itself from bourgeois society and tries to organize through avant-garde art a new praxis of life, fundamentally disjunctive from the one established by the bourgeoisie. As Bürger observes, “Aestheticism turns out to have been the necessary precondition of the avant-garde intent” (Bürger, 49).

*The Avant-garde as Self-criticism of Art*

As we mentioned in the previous section, the avant-garde strives to reconsider the position of art in the social sphere. Bourgeois art, in its attempt to become self-sufficient, falls into decadence and it is in the avant-gardiste intent that we can follow the sublation mechanism by which avant-garde endeavours to remove the autonomy of art and to abolish it as an institution. The way in which the avant-garde manages this is by engaging in a constant ordeal of self-criticism. Peter Bürger distinguishes two types of criticism (in art): “system-immanent criticism”, the type of criticism that is inherent to a system without actually being pre-established from within the system, and self-criticism. The German critic makes a very strong point by inferring to Christianity, where both types of criticism existed: on one side there was the system-immanent criticism of the Catholic Church, which disputed with the religious ideas of the Reformation (later materialized by the existence of the Counter-Reformation), and on the other side there was the self-criticism of the Protestant Reformation, which attacked the Catholic Church and its religious institution. The same distinction could be applied, according to Bürger, in art, where he sees a clear example of system-immanent criticism in the dispute between French classicism and Baroque drama. In such a case, the criticism takes place from within the institution and by internal means, without acting outside its own system. Avant-garde self-criticism, instead, attacks the system (via negation of institution) and elaborates a process of self-knowledge. The self-critical manifestation of art cannot be possible unless the difference between art as an institution and the content of the works of art is cancelled.

When institutionalized art polemicizes, within its system, with the content, there is automatically a marginalization of alternative artistic manifestations. Avant-garde, by way of negating the institution of art, reveals the state of self-criticism that art itself has reached through Aestheticism and through which bourgeois art isolates itself from the praxis of life and alienates its own artists. These

were all symptoms of a constant state of self-criticism. The avant-garde did nothing more than highlight this process through its radical artistic views.

*The concept of “work of art” in the avant-garde*

Although the avant-garde includes, through its constant revolt against the institution of art and against the world, daring revisions, fearless reappraisals and even intrepid demolitions of certain traditions established by bourgeois art, it also strives towards a reinvention of the concept of “work of art”. By way of contesting the self-sufficiency of bourgeois art and including avant-gardiste art in the praxis of life, the avant-garde deserves a discussion about engagement through art, rather than choosing to see their rebellious acts as purely negatory.

First of all, the avant-garde is not so much a nihilistic movement, as it is one with clear intentions of regenerating art. The inherently insurgent nature of the avant-garde led to it being perceived as belonging rather to the first category, than to the second. In the case of the Romanian avant-garde, literary critics such as Ion Pop saw in the avant-gardiste work of art not the intention of renewal, but rather a total lack of interest for the final result: “What is most striking – beyond any exacting demands of their programmes – the quasi-absence of interest for the result of their process, or in other words, for the *work of art*” (Pop 1990, 8). But such assertions limit the intentionality behind the avant-gardiste work of art, inasmuch as at least two ideals can be observed out of their projects, in regards to the purposefulness of the work of art: the democratization of critical reception and the total liberalization of art. Such aspirations would not be taken into considerations if we assume that the avant-garde is involved only in the perpetual movement towards creation and not interested in the finality of their works of art. Every avant-gardiste movement endeavoured to find diverse aesthetical solutions. At the same time, every avant-gardiste movement shouldered their inherent chaotic nature caused by the lack of organic unity from within their isolated groups. An individual work of art belonging to a surrealist artist is not contained by a unifying principle belonging to surrealism because surrealism (as all avant-gardiste currents) did not have a unifying principle. The content of the works of art were aesthetically legitimate even as individual elements. In other words, the avant-gardiste work of art is not conceived organically. Moreover, as Bürger puts it, avant-gardiste art is

essentially non-organic, in stark contrast to traditional art, prevalently organic, whose constituent elements are governed by a whole.

Another case of the concept of work of art being reconfigured can be found within the Dada movement. Mario De Micheli explains that the dadaist attitude of opposing traditional approaches to the work of art is manifested by raising the artistic *deed* to a level of equal importance in the creative act:

“Dada is not so much an artistic-literary trend inasmuch as it is a particular disposition of the spirit, it is the extreme act of anti-scholasticism, which employs *any* means in order to carry on its battles. *The deed*, more than the work of art, is the one that is of interest to Dada; and the deed can be fulfilled from any moral, political, artistic directions. One thing matters most; that this deed always be a *challenge* against the so-called common sense, against morality, against rules, against the law; therefore, *the scandal* is the preferred instrument of Dada expression” (De Micheli 1968, 145)

The dadaist “deed”, taken to its extreme point in Tzara’s 1920 *Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love* led to a continuous stream of dadaist work of art fabrications and to the creation of individual dadaisms. Finally, it led to an nearly endless supply of reiterations and permutations that employed the same method, to an alarming frequency. “Practice is the death of Dada” (De Micheli, 148). But the undeniable merit of dadaism was, essentially, that of utter democratization of the artistic act.

Nevertheless, the most prominent groundwork for an artistic doctrine was constructed by surrealism. Such an ambition was next to impossible to be obtained by Dada. De Micheli sees in surrealism a constructive movement, through which man is offered a “freedom achievable positively” (De Micheli, 159). It is the artistic movement that substituted the Dada refusal with “experimental, scientific search, based on philosophy and understanding” (159). In other words, if Dada has always been open to new horizons in regards to the democratization of art and its reception, surrealism introduces the fundamental discussion of freedom. This is why surrealism is a profoundly revolutionary movement. Finally, a clear distinction has to be made between dadaist and surrealist automatism: if the dadaist automatism

follows a mechanical principle, the surrealist automatism employs the technique of utilizing the raw material of the unconscious.

We have chosen dadaism and surrealism as the main avant-garde movements in discussing regarding the work of art by reason of their radical views on this concept. Furthermore, we tried to establish the importance of avant-gardiste movements in reformation of art, which was obtained by systematically negating the postulates of the institutionalized, autonomous bourgeois art, by employing self-criticism and by reinserting art in the praxis of life, and last, but not least, by attempting to liberalize art with the purpose of broadening the horizon of critical reception inside the society. At the same time, the need to establish historical coordinates in regards to the avant-garde is a prerequisite for a pertinent discussion surrounding the Romanian avant-garde. The Romanian avant-garde movements, while easy to establish historically, were also met with by a socially unstable terrain. A conceptual preamble was paramount in order to better understand the Romanian avant-garde movements and to better understand its historical importance, insofar as the general confusion regarding them are mainly caused by the constant shifting of geo-political positions that has influenced the Romanian culture throughout the twentieth century.

### *The Romanian Avant-garde. The “unu” group*

There are three periods in which the Romanian avant-garde developed. The first avant-gardiste wave corresponds to the birth of *Contimporanul* magazine, in 1922. The second wave emerged after the departure of several of *Contimporanul*'s members and the subsequent creation of *unu* magazine in 1928, led by Sașa Pană. It is within this second wave that the most prominent avant-gardiste authors, such as Ilarie Voronca, Stephan Roll or Geo Bogza, have written the most important manifestoes of Romanian avant-garde. And finally, the third wave represented by the surrealists Gellu Naum, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, D. Trost and others, emerged in 1940 and were active until 1947. The constructivist group from *Contimporanul* was, according to Ion Pop, “the first Romanian avant-gardiste group with a well developed artistic programme” (Pop 1990, 82). As time passed, *Contimporanul* magazine became moderate, eclectic, with little to no radical views which often characterized avant-garde movements. Consequently, in 1930 (the year in which the famous article *Greybeard Vinea's Alm*, in *unu*, was published),

ideological conflicts arise that will lead to a secession between *Contimporanul* and *unu* magazines. Paul Cernat summarizes this rupture:

“A conflict between two generations and two divergent attitudes: on one side – the cosmopolitan and rather elitist moderation of authors such as Ion Vinea, Marcel Iancu, Jacques G. Costin, on the other – the opinionated insurgence of the younger avant-gardistes from *unu* magazine” (Cernat 2007, 67)

It is well known that the Romanian avant-garde, wholly synchronized with the European one, not having a cultural field developed enough to manifest itself fully, condemned to develop in a country dominated by dogmatic literary currents and conservative values, develops its conflicts and challenges the status quo of art within their own isolated groups. This is why the avant-gardistes of *unu*, *Urmuz* and *Alge* magazines gradually break away from the programme developed by *Contimporanul*, although it would be more appropriate to mention that, in fact, *Contimporanul*, by changing its direction towards a moderate avant-garde, withdraws from the ideational core of the avant-garde. Even in the absence of any external factors that could have threatened its dissolution, the Romanian avant-garde manages to generate conflicts between its few groups. One notable example of this is the famous article *Greybeard Vinea's Alm (Coliva lui Moș Vinea)*, signed by members of the *unu* group:

“We have witnessed, with a sadness barely whimpered, the progressive hindering of *Contimporanul*, the embarrassing decrepitude of its collection from the last five years. (...) *Let it be forever known: CONTIMPORANUL* has nothing in common with our enthusiasm and our youth, with the art and the spirit that we alone represent at this hour” (Sașa Pană, 1930)

This is a rather historical moment in the evolution of Romanian avant-garde, since it clearly is a radical statement of renouncement, after which the avant-gardiste from *unu* magazine will culturally establish the most profoundly ostentatious form of avant-garde the Romanian literature has ever seen.

*On the Literaturization of Avant-gardiste manifestoes*

A most relevant discussion regarding the avant-gardiste group of *unu* magazine is linked to their literary programmes around which the authors form their poetics. In regards to these manifestoes, it is essential to mention the literary criteria surrounding them, as literary critics such as Adrian Marino and Ion Pop have found that avant-garde manifestoes more often than not have strong literary value. Moreover, these manifestoes greatly surpass their own limits of discourse (in regards to their artistic scopes) and fall into the literary category, as Ion Pop states:

“The manifesto, through its nature of directly communicating with a certain public, becomes the ideal means of expression for the avant-gardistes, offering the space and assistance necessary to rapidly and efficiently impact the public” (Pop 1990, 399)

There is also a certain volatility in an avant-garde manifesto’s discourse, as it often leads to a confusion between ethical and aesthetical values and more often than not evolves into a discernibly politicized discourse. This also leads to a double contamination of the discourse: as the literary works of the avant-gardistes are imbued with recognizable traits of their manifestoes, so are these discourses ingrained with the individual poetics of the authors. Considering these aspects, we see the avant-gardiste manifesto as a discourse that greatly exceeds its artistic scopes and to which we can assign literary value, since its legitimizing aspect resides in its aesthetic validity.

We have chosen the avant-gardiste group surrounding the *unu* magazine (and its associates that have written in other magazines such as *Urmuz* and *Alge*) for its importance regarding the aspect of literary manifestoes, since *unu* magazine, in its activity spanning only four years, has been rather productive in the creation of literary manifestoes. As we mentioned before, after parting ways with *Contimporanul*, their aims and scopes evolved into the most stilistically radical views of the Romanian avant-garde, and their literary manifestoes are imbued with stark images of insurgence and revolt against the comfortable, moderate views of their peers. As such, a *Creed (Crez)*, which appeared in *unu* in 1929, is filled with imagery of vitality, exuberance and sexuality, characteristic to their literary works:

“I believe in the perversity of flowers and maidens. (...) I believe in sex. I believe in screams. I believe in galoshes and condoms. (...) I believe in a sexual vision of the whole living universe” (Geo Bogza 1929a).

In another text, *Interviu while driving (Interviu la volan)*, the exploration of sexuality and sensuality is proposed through genuinely daring imagery:

“A Copernicus is needed. A sexual Copernicus that will open our eyes on the overwhelming importance of our reproductive system. Not unlike the Sun, sex should be put in the spotlight, our existence, our attitudes depend on it as life on earth depends on our central star” (Bogza 1929b)

Art, according to these avant-gardistes, becomes a vital principle that is ultimately forbidden to man. In another text, the instrument chosen by the author, a pencil, is left to freely roam within the human mind’s abyss, far from the awareness of the immediate reality:

“To fall asleep with a cigar in your mouth and your pencil tucked behind your ear is a perfection not yet reached by humans from other planets” (Bogza 1928a)

This assumed position of literary frondeur is also consolidated in their earlier discourses. Such is the case of Geo Bogza, who created *Urmuz* magazine, a short-lived publication with only five numbers, which he abandoned in order to join *unu*. In these earlier articles, we can clearly see that the foundation of avant-gardiste art is not unlike the old founding narratives. But in the case of these artists, the edifice on which they build their mythos is put through trials of violence and labour:

“I will not print a book until I will be certain that from within its pages I will emerge wholly to leap in front of my reader and grab him by the throat. (...) Let my phrase be a raging virile organ that will deflower their chockfull souls and leave behind the seed of new skies” (Bogza 1928b)

In a most famous article that led to charges of moral turpitude against the author because of the ostentatious repetition of a certain word belonging to the semantic field of scatology, Bogza delivers one of the most representative samples of avant-gardiste literary programme:

“I claim, not for the sake of paradox, but for establishing an undisguised attitude, that in the absolute frame of *this word* lies within a series of realities that are usually deemed impure. But purity lies in everything that does not make any efforts for art, in what does not represent any compromise (...) regardless of the relationship between one’s etiquette and the rigors of general morality” (Bogza 1930)

An atypical text, not because of its subject, but rather of the idea of regressive pattern behind it, is one in which its author substantiates a utopia based on acts that stem from madness and suicide. Bold, destructive and at the same time bequeathing, the author’s imaginary creates, in avant-gardiste spirit, the image of art risen from the ashes:

“In the early moments of chaste innocence of the first man on earth, I would like to know not his first act, but his first dream. It is perhaps one of the most fulminating moments of a pre-history of which the only other events that interest me with burning passion are the moment in which a man first fell into madness and the moment when the first suicide on the planet took place. Man has forged a legend for the first that killed, for the first that lit the first fire, but has left out any myth regarding the first damned: the first that fried his brains and the first that refused life” (Bogza 1931a)

There are also several manifestoes that were written in the name of the avant-gardiste collective. One of the most substantial manifestoes that are voiced by this collective is the one entitled *The Creating Exasperation (Exasperarea creatoare)*. In this manifesto, Geo Bogza manages to create a very pertinent example of what we called in the earlier sections as manifestations by which the avant-garde negates the autonomy of art, and challenges the literature of those that

create literature as a means to achieve a privileged status. Following the same pattern of revolt, the author “writes, because life exasperates him”. In the midst of a literature governed by self-sufficiency, the avant-gardistes of *unu* are true saboteurs:

“Our life is burned by conflict. Our dynamo is a corrosive lucidity that initiates a forceful and permanent trial against the outer world and against ourselves. Our exasperation is a pure exasperation. An exasperation against all that exists, an exasperation against all that doesn’t exist. An exasperation against exasperation itself. An exasperation against anything that subdues us and an exasperation against anything that we surpass and bend before. And everything with ravaging intensity and turmoil” (Bogza 1931b)

In 1932, *unu* magazine has been symbolically “assassinated” by its creators. A *Denunciation (Denunț)* greets the first page of the last number published, saying:

“*Unu* is at the brink of its sixth year. And for it to remain young, **we assassinate** it today, before it starts primary school” (Pană 1932).

Another collective article in which the same practice of denouncing the ever-coveted comfort of bourgeois literature is present as in *The Creating Exasperation* is the one signed by Paul Păun, Gherasim Luca, S. Perahim and Geo Bogza: *The Poetry that We Want to Create (Poezia pe care vrem să o facem)* in the only number of *Viața imediată* magazine, appeared in 1933. The magazine was founded by Geo Bogza in a last defying attempt to save the already deprecated avant-garde of the second wave in a moment when the last bastion of the historical avant-garde, represented by *unu* magazine, has already sung its proverbial swan song. In the same year, *Contimporanul* has also ended its activity, and the other minor avant-garde groups, such as the authors from *Meridian* or *Alge*, alongside their periodicals with provocative names, have not managed to gain relevance. This, battling against the poetical virtuosity of the new hermetic poetry, the authors of this manifesto propose the same type of poetry which was in accordance to their old affinities. We can immediately remark the same seductive preferences in its discourse:

“We wish to capture in a state wild and lively all that makes our time so tragic, the emotion that strangles us when we know ourselves to be contemporary with millions of people that are exasperated by misery and injustice. (...) We want to create a poetry of our time, and this is no longer a time for collective neurosis, but a time of thirst for life”  
(Bogza, 1933)

Considering the articles cited, we find that the manifestoes signed by the Romanian avant-gardistes of the second wave continuously strive to become literature in their own right. These texts have emanate a profound sense of negation, of innovation, of iconoclasm and at the same time provide founding narratives that leads to the conclusion that the avant-garde is indeed a constructive literary movement. The ostentatious exhibitionism with which these authors let loose their artistic visions, their ardent beliefs in the renewal of literature and, more than that, the striking similarities between their rhetoric employed in manifestoes and the one utilized in their poetry can very well confirm the thesis of the avant-gardiste manifesto as a self-sustaining unique literary genre.

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