THE LIFE OF A LITERARY NETWORK – A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH TO
SBURĂTORUL LITERARY CENACLE


Abstract: Investigated mostly in a co-dependent relationship with its titular figure – E. Lovinescu (1881-1943), the Romanian literary circle Sburătorul has achieved a paradoxical position in the field of Romanian critical inquiry. On one hand, this particular group is an ever-present reference in research dedicated to the interwar Romanian literary modernist scene. On the other hand, only a few monographic works explore the actual dynamic of this group, and while they are well documented and multi-layered a lot of material remains yet to be explored. The Sburătorul Literary Journals (Sburătorul: Agende literare), kept by E. Lovinescu and subsequently edited and published posthumously by his daughter, Monica Lovinescu, are one of the most valuable yet underestimated bibliographical instruments in Romania. Owing much to this particular instrument, my paper aims to investigate the human resource of Sburătorul literary circle. The methodology of my paper stands at the intersection between network studies, distant reading, and sociology and within these theoretical frameworks I intend to explore the relationships and dynamics between the most active members of the group, in order to “measure” the symbolic capital of the group.

Keywords: Sburătorul, Lovinescu, literary journals, sociology of groups, network studies.
Sburătorul, a long-standing literary cenacle in modern Romania, led by Eugen Lovinescu (1881-1943), was perhaps the most relevant critical platform for modernist writers, a shared space that provided young talents and modernist literature aficionados with theoretical and critical instruments that helped shape their work. The cenacle’s meetings gradually engendered a particular way of living and writing that contributed to the development of their literary formulas and critical thinking as much as formal academic education. There are numerous testimonies in this vein, both in academic studies and in the writers’ journals or interviews. The important role that Sburătorul played for a couple of generations that actively molded what we now call modern literature and criticism is a thoroughly demonstrated matter in the Romanian academe.

In the present paper, what interests me then is 1. the way modernist writers negotiated their position in this group, 2. how distant reading can reconstitute a network that, so far, has been mostly taken for granted, and 3. the approximate impact that this kind of membership can have on the ideological position of a prose writer. Added to these somewhat specific objectives, my analysis aims to achieve two methodological benefits: showing what kind of data can (and cannot) be provided by distant reading tools regarding literary groups and presenting an overview of these data that could prove useful for future investigations of this group.

The advantages of distant reading have been tackled in the Romanian space¹. Novels, critical phenomena articulated in cultural and literary periodicals, translations and theoretical debates surrounding them have all received attention by young scholars who aimed to enrich Romanian literary studies with the latest methodological advances in quantitative and digital approaches². However, the role and the activity of literary

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groups such as cenacles, reading clubs, literary circles, editorial boards, university organizations and so on have rarely been addressed using such methods. The most convincing argument for what can be understood as a lack of interest in this type of literary entities refers to the scarcity in terms of prime material, of resources that can be used to gather the needed data. However, the group I am targeting has such a dowry: the literary agendas of Sburătorul. Thus, this article is an experimental attempt to use this instrument in order to provide a panoramic view of Sburătorul’s human resource and its symbolic capital. Edited by Monica Lovinescu and Gabriela Omăt, Sburătorul: Agende Literare (Lovinescu 1993-2001) constitutes the primary source in the investigation of this cenacle. Eminent approaches in Romanian history and literary criticism owe indeed a great deal to these cultural artefacts, which record, on the one hand, the evolution and scope of this organization within the Romanian cultural setting, and on the other hand, the internal dynamics, the relations between its members, the role of its mentor Eugen Lovinescu, and finally, the cultural capital of this long-lived cenacle. Within this section of the research, my interest lies in some of the previously mentioned aspects, yet, this time examined from a distance, namely: the dynamics of the group’s formation process, members’ attendance, and gender distribution within the cenacle – all in an attempt to answer the questions I posed at the beginning of the paper. The period of time in question encompasses the first seven years of operation that were recorded in the agendas (from 1923, when Lovinescu starts taking notes, i.e., the fifth year since the cenacle mentored by him was established, until 1930) – truly the cenacle’s most effervescent years. The methodology employed here lies at the intersection of two fields: network studies and (group) sociology.

Network studies that work exclusively with distant reading are still an emergent and quite exotic field, to put it leniently, in the Romanian humanities, where the notion of network is mainly used in a metaphorical sense. Nonetheless, more recent studies propose methods of network visualization of literary and cultural phenomena with highly relevant results and with a wide array of potential applications. Perhaps the

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3 Among these, I find the most useful ones to be G. Gheorghiță, Sburătorul: revista și cenaclul, Bucharest, Minerva, 1976, and Ligia Tudurachi, Grup sburător. Trăitul și scrisul împreună în cenaclul lui E. Lovinescu, Timișoara, Editura Universității de Vest, 2019.
greatest advantage of this research method is quite simply put by the authors of *Networks: A very short Introduction*:

While the network approach eliminates many of the individual features of the phenomenon considered, it still maintains some of its specific features. Namely, it does not alter the size of the system – i. e., the number of its elements – or the pattern of interaction – i.e., the specific set of connections between elements. Such a simplified model is nevertheless enough to capture the properties of the system (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 26).

Form, distribution, frequency, movement – the central points of focus in the experimental analysis of the cenacle herewith proposed.

The second theoretical framework of my analysis refers to an old theory of group sociology. Advanced in 1965 by the sociologist Bruce Tuckman in the article “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups”, the examination of the interaction processes within a group is set in four stages and regards its creation and functioning. The four phases, i.e., forming, storming, norming, and performing, are equally applicable to literary groups, I believe. Its viability is likewise sustained by the fact that the system designed by Bruce Tuckman is not intended as revolutionary, but it is rather a sequence developed from the analysis of no fewer than 50 sociological models, prior to his approach, whose pros and cons are carefully weighed. I shall briefly describe the steps. According to the author, the first, that of forming, is the stage in which power relations are firstly established by appointing the leader, defining the members’ positions, and secondly, the moment when their duties and roles are outlined. The second stage, that of storming, is marked by tensions and conflicts. In this phase, the members of the circle begin to negotiate their status and tasks, to express discontent or leave the group altogether, by cause of the arisen conflicts. The third stage, norming, brings the calm after the storm: conflicts have been settled, tensions, resolved, new rules have been issued, and new limits have been imposed. This is the moment when group functioning patterns are stabilized and in which (written and unwritten) norms and rules are set, coupled with the formation of an actual collective habitus and with interpersonal relationships becoming more intimate and stable. The final stage
identified by Tuckman – the stage in which group performance reaches its peak – is the most effervescent and successful in terms of both personal and collective projects. The group is more focused on tasks than on interpersonal dynamics and intimate relationships⁴.

One premise of my research covers not so much the kind of image that was proliferated by modernist prose writers in the social sphere as the overlapping position of the prose writer, literary critic, and cultural ideologue. The question of whether this juxtaposition had direct consequences in the evolution of the Romanian novel requires a much more extensive investigation. Even so, the current analysis attempts to contribute to such a debate.

**Networking**⁵

My application stems from a question concerning the nature of *Sburătorul* as a group unit. Can this cenacle be interpreted as a group with a typical and retraceable way of functioning following Tuckman’s model, which, according to the author, is suitable for any type of group? Are there any particularities regarding the interhuman relationships in the case of Lovinescu’s cenacle? The uniqueness of this cultural and literary association within the Romanian space has been defended and promoted by various approaches to the phenomena within traditional and modern history and literary sociology, largely due to the significant impact the members of the Lovinescu cenacle had on the development of modern Romanian literature and literary criticism. A graphical representation of the attendance rate, I think, brings a useful argument in exploring the legacy of this circle.

*Figure 1* represents an abstraction of the member distribution between 1923 and 1930 rendered with the help of a visualization tool, namely Gephi. The index follows Lovinescu’s notes in the agendas. The members’ location in the network and their vicinity with the center – embodying Lovinescu – is based on the total number of attendances at the meetings within the given period of time. This first network seeks to formally reproduce the stage of conflict (or storming) of the above proposed model.

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⁴ For the detailed rendition, see Bruce Tuckman, “Developmental Sequence in Small Groups”, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 63, no. 6, 1965, pp. 384-399.

⁵ Part of this data was previously published as a work in progress in *Vatra*, no. 8-9, 2020, pp. 87-92.
As for the first phase, information is rather scarce. Yet, the insights and interpretations in sociological and critical approaches are valid and can be reiterated here. In her latest volume, *Grup sburător. Trăitul și scrisul împreună în cenuacliul lui E. Lovinescu*, Ligia Tudurachi advances a series of interpretations in relation to the incipient stage of Lovinescu’s cenacle, on the subject of the nicknaming of participants (this, too, is a unique event in contrast with the customs of other literary groups, maintains the author⁶), Lovinescu’s responsibilities as mentor (once again, a mentor with peculiarities and singular positions as opposed to other foreign models), and the fundamental rules being established in an almost ritualistic fashion (Lovinescu carefully selecting who remains to dine with him, the setting of the stage for the group reading, the “choreography” of the participants, where they sat, with whom they talked the most etc.). The atmosphere of the first few meetings is presented by the author by means of fine readings of personal diaries and other such instruments. The researcher unravels a form of mysticism that dominates the forming stage, something rarely encountered in local and foreign literary salons. For instance, the position of the leader is by no means negotiated or negotiable, with Eugen Lovinescu epitomizing group authority without any right to appeal. A promoter of modernity and the import of Western form into the local context, Lovinescu quite decisively sets the aims of the cenacle’s collective creation and experience, that is, the emancipation of literature (brought about through collective readings, very harsh sanctions for style or content deviations, constant training of a literary conduct etc.), despite having proclaimed total acceptance of any type of literature and views as one of the guiding principles of the cenacle.

To return to the network I mentioned earlier, the second phase of the functioning of this group is the most tense and determines, first of all, who will be the most active members and have the highest attendance rate at cenacle meetings. To reiterate the advantages of network representation of a phenomenon, as supported by Caldarelli and Catanzaro, this image can uncover certain unknown facts about the cenacle’s history, such as 1. the overwhelming number of participants, which would be otherwise

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⁶ “(...) Numele de *Sburător* merită în sine o mică investigație. Lovinescu l-a împrumutat de la Minulescu, care nu-l folosește. Încă din 1918, viitorul mentor sburătorist îi scria lui Mihail Dragomirescu despre intenția sa de a crea un cenuaclu cu acest nume. Situația e de la început atipică, atât prin faptul că numele preexistă cenuaclului, cât și prin caracterul *nedemocratic* al alegerii acestui nume. Decizia îi aparține în totalitate lui Lovinescu, niciunul din membrii (viitori) ai grupului nu va mai fi consultat în această privință” Tudurachi 10.
impossible to assess by simply skimming cenacle documents, perhaps because many names featured here were excluded from the cultural memory and 2. the actual core of the organization, only partially intuited, including names such as Felix Aderca, Sanda Movilă, Camil Petrescu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Romiro Ortiz, Vladimir Streinu and others. This list also unveils a less-discussed aspect, namely the relative heterogeneity of these personalities and their critical and literary works. In other words, the center does not exclusively consist of authors who create canonical literature (or at least popular at the time), nor of tutelary figures in literary historiography. The most active cenacle members are not necessarily the most active or notable novelists, poets, and critics of the time. This can be seen as one of the many arguments in favor of an evolutionist approach to the Romanian literary modernity, as canonical works are the result of a process in which representatives of the minor literary regime are just as important as the ones who achieved canonization and literary prestige.

A particularity of the cenacle in terms of formation and functioning resides in the partial overlap between the stages. Measured both by the number of readings within the cenacle and by the members’ active involvement in periodicals, literary and critical productivity does not reach high levels only in the absence of conflict, negotiation, and the “normalization” stage of the group, as would be expected, but extends over the entire period. This intermingling of stages is also suggested by Ligia Tudurachi in the previously mentioned volume, the relations between the Sburătorul members being “constantly renegotiated, between what is written and what is lived, between the individual act and the community behind it, between the intellectual and the affective, between the affirmation of auctoriality and its sensitive experience among others and in relation to them” (Tudurachi 19, my translation). To put it differently, it is a permanent state of tension – a constant obstacle in overcoming the phase of conflict and status negotiation. Hence, if the first network representation attempts to render precisely the tense mobility – suggesting who remains close to and who departs from the center marked by the mentor within the given time frame – the following aims to depict rather the third and fourth stages of Tuckman’s model, designed to convey information about the already organized mode of operation (better said, relatively organized, given the constant renegotiations).
Figure 2 features the distribution of the members in cenacle meetings, based on their attendance, and it may be decoded as follows: the first and narrowest circle, the one closest to the center, incorporates the members who were consistently present each year at Lovinescu’s cenacle; the second circle comprises members who were regularly present at the cenacle during at least five of the seven years here investigated; the third series compiles the cenacle attendees during the first three or four years in the time frame here concerned, after which they are no longer mentioned in the agendas; finally, those furthest from the center represent sporadic attendances. An observation worth making at this point of my demonstration is the fact that the literary agendas, as the main resource employed in my approach, may be somehow guilty of distorting reality. The information reported by Eugen Lovinescu is rather subjective – stylistic clues may lead to the conclusion that the host of Sburătorul recorded people and events depending on their type (failures, successes, disappointments, pleasant surprises) and/or his own disposition. Thus, the result’s adequacy to reality is high, yet not maximum.

Whereas the first network seeks to display the total number of attendances, which could render the stage of negotiations and tensions clearer, the second network attempts to organize Sburătorul members so as to expose power structures, relatively established and already at work. The intercalation of the three stages is evident at the level of constant productivity (that can be seen by accessing other sources), incessant tensions and members who leave the group (in fact, the fourth year of the interval assessed by me corresponds with the ninth year since the founding of the cenacle, which means Sburătorul was already a well-rounded group at this point in time, when some leave the cenacle), new members joining etc.

Emphasizing the discrepancies between this organization’s patterns and traditional sociological ones provides an additional argument for the uniqueness and relevance of the cenacle – which is characterized by continuous emergence and impressive productivity – in the local interwar landscape. This group’s instability indicates its extremely active involvement in the rapid development of the interwar period in Romanian literature and art. The Sburătorul members’ literary, journalistic, and historiographic production occurs in a state of permanent tension, renegotiation of meaning within a circle whose cultural capital, as attested by the names featured in this network, extends over various areas of Romanian modernism (contributions to the
cenacle’s collective criticism come from not only members with quite different ideological profiles, but who also advance different literary formulas – ranging from the Proustian novel to realist prose, from playwrights to avant-garde poets – formulas that interact perhaps for the very first time under the same imperatives).

As for the center of the network, Felix Aderca, Camil Petrescu, Anton Holban, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu are the closest prose writers to Lovinescu, the mentor, with the most significant participation and most regular attendance. In view of their position in the field, each prose writer who stays close to Lovinescu could serve as a research topic in and of himself/herself, in an attempt to give an answer to one of the questions that prompted this study: how great of an impact did participating to these meetings have upon modernist writers? Let us take only a brief look at them. The first two, Camil Petrescu and Felix Aderca, a canonical and a semi-canonical writer, have the following in common outside the boundaries of the cenacle: both are fierce publicists, literary critics with high aspirations, and two fundamental voices of the Romanian modernist interwar period. Camil Petrescu’s contribution to importing Proustianism into Romania also manifested itself in his lesser-known journalistic texts, militating for a modern modernism as “a revolt against cliché and trickery” (Petrescu 239). Felix Aderca, too, was a proponent of modernism who received less attention in terms of the critical reception than I believe he would have deserved. Not only did he provide in his articles and essays, more than just a few times, insights into Romanian literature which were confirmed posthumously by Romanian criticism without even referencing Aderca (predicting Anton Holban’s success as a young prose writer is an edifying example7), but he was perhaps the most experimental literary modernist of his time, testing multiple formulas, from naturalism to expressionism.

Anton Holban and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu are two of the most educated prose writers. In addition to their role as prose writers, they, too, assisted the development of modern Romanian literature with their Western education and erudition applied in creating certain literary models later on described as one of the most innovative presented by the national canon. Their connections with other literary groups and journals proved crucial for the survival and thriving of the Sburătorul

7 See Felix Aderca, Contribuții critice, Bucharest, Minerva, 1983.
cenacle. Both of them have contributed to other major journals and maintained contact with peers involved in different organizations, as is the case of Felix Aderca and his collaboration with Contimporanul; albeit he does not attach himself to the avant-garde movement, he builds relations with the Romanian avant-garde — which is also present on the Sburătorul stage. The members of Lovinescu’s cenacle cultivate a dynamic environment where national as well as international literary and cultural currents are broached and not only discussed, but also assimilated by individual literary projects.

Another pattern can be visualized using this method: gender distribution within the cenacle. In a survey of the cenacle’s memorial materials (diaries, memoirs, interviews, agendas), the portrait and input of female attendees seem to be painted in a favorable light. Seated on the sofa (a famous piece of furniture repeatedly discussed by the cenacle’s investigators), in the center of the room, women appear to be a central presence in the weekly debates that take place in Lovinescu’s apartment. Figure 3 aims to test if this image is or not sustained by actual data.

For the sake of simplification, I have eliminated the nametags. The distribution follows the total attendance at cenacle meetings during the seven years here investigated. The pink dots represent female attendees, whereas the blue ones, men. The image emphasizes the sporadic nature and the rather low percentage of female attendees who are close to the center. Out of the total of participants at Sburătorul during this period, only 29% are women and out of the total number of women, almost 50% represent the wives of some of the active participants who are not noted as actively engaged in the critical debates. The relatively low rate of attendance among female writers at this cenacle sheds light on another type of tension, one related, of course, to the marginalization of the female writers in the Romanian landscape (even Lovinescu himself being blameworthy when discussing women’s inability to produce quality literature or when referring to valuable female writers, such as Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, as having overcome their feminine condition and succeeded in producing manly writing).

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This network translates into the fact that either women had a minority and sporadic attendance at the cenacle meetings or they were neglected in Lovinescu’s records. The female literary and journalistic production of that time – significant, although ignored – is not correlated with their activity as cenacle members, for they seem to be treated rather as exotic or merely decorative presences. The data reveals, first and foremost, the inequality of opportunities faced by female writers. The marginalization of female writers within this group leads to the marginalization of not only the literature produced by them, but also their contribution to the development of modernist literature.

**Conclusions**

The literary group having Eugen Lovinescu at its core constitutes one of the most important infrastructures for the development of Romanian literature and literary criticism during the interwar period. This group’s symbolic capital, already certified by the numerous documents it handed down – ranging from the agendas here scrutinized to the journals and memoirs of those who interacted with *Sburătorul* – is once more demonstrated by the quantification of the attendance of important cultural characters who took part in the weekly meetings hosted by the modernist critic during the 1920s and 1930s. The premise of my analysis had to do with the need to continue exploring this group’s legacy, by adding to the traditional methods of investigation new and experimental methods like the ones proposed by digital humanists. The main objective of this paper was to present, at least partially, the dynamics of these meetings. The aim of these networks is to be a useful resource in subsequent research, as they are part of an ongoing project of reevaluating the *Sburătorul* cenacle and its role. Lovinescu succeeds in creating and supporting a network as relevant as possible for the modernization of literature, involving critics and writers who can surely be called crucial agents in the process of modernizing Romanian literature in a cosmopolitan, even transnational, context.
Figure 1
THE LIFE OF A LITERARY NETWORK

Figure 2
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