

context”, “striking”, “atypical”, “instinctive”, “intuitive”, nouns like “miracle”, “exception”, or adverbs like “very rarely”, “seldom” seem to suggest atypicality is *the* norm in literary history.

A consistent stylistician and a critic extremely well-learned in narratology and formalism, Mihai Zamfir would have, probably, had the best prospects to write a history (even a partial one) of literary forms. But instead, in bringing a confirmation and an apotheosis of his valuable contributions from the 1970s and 1980s, the 2011 *Short History* falls one step back. The critic started from the most modern outposts of literary analysis, only to slide back to an old-fashioned aestheticism, and instead of painting the big picture, he chose to draw brooding portraits of “great writers”.

In conclusion, we could observe that Mihai Zamfir’s evolution is symptomatic for the inability of post-war Romanian criticism to provide a history of literary forms. Although the 1964–1989 age produced a climate fruitful enough in this direction, the myth of the “great writer”, and a maximalist conception about “aesthetic value” (irreducible to series or typologies) hindered Romanian criticism from achieving such a project.

# THE ROMANIAN WOMEN POETS' WAR ON WAR

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**Abstract** This paper sets out to retrieve and discuss a set of war poems by Romanian women poets, shaped around a pacifist strain that begins as a reaction to World War I, consolidates during World War II, and intensifies against the background of the communist propaganda in the second half of the fifth decade of the last century. The paper reviews war poems by women poets such as Carmen Sylva, Matilda Cugler-Poni, Maria Cunțan, Elena Văcărescu, Anișoara Odeanu, Magda Isanos, Maria Banuș, Veronica Porumbacu, and Nina Cassian.

**Keywords** Romanian women poets, war poetry, pacifist poetry, World War I, World War II, mobilization, propaganda.

The presence of women in the literature of war and the presence of the war in the literature written by women represent two steady directions in the recent literary history research concerned with the two world wars. In the work of combatant-writers, in the French as well as in the Anglo-Saxon or the Hispanic space, the representation of women in literature reveals a shift away from the positive, candid image of delicate femininity that must be protected at all costs in the first years of World War I, and towards a subsequent negative view of women as ungrateful usurpers of the social role of the men who had gone to war. As Aránzazu Usandizaga Sainz points out,

Uno de los fenómenos propios de la Gran Guerra es la creciente amargura que los soldados sienten hacia retaguardia. A medida que avanzan los horrores, se genera [...] un intenso odio tanto hacia quienes les envían al sacrificio inútil, como hacia las mujeres que viven la guerra desde la seguridad de la retaguardia. Este resentimiento, unido a la profunda

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inseguridad que produce entre los hombres el creciente poder de las mujer, estimula una gran misoginia que adquiere diversas formas en la escritura de guerra y posguerra<sup>1</sup>.

A tendency already visible in the literature of World War I and more prominent in the writings of the Second World War, sometimes to the complete exclusion of the symbols of femininity from the reflection space of the literary work, the misogynistic attitude was not created, but rather reinforced by the war experience. As argued by Pierre Schoentjes, the unflattering representation of women stems from an accumulation of factors, without direct link to the war: « Héritière d'une tradition de misogynie bien représentée en France à la fin du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, et à laquelle n'étaient pas étrangères les théories biologiques et psychologiques étayant le naturalisme, la littérature qui s'inspire de la Grande Guerre montre rarement la femme à son avantage »<sup>2</sup>. His observation extends, of course, beyond the boundaries of French literature.

Indeed, war did not create, but only added to the misogynistic outlook. On the other hand, it did lay out the premises for the emancipation of women. Forced by the specific historical circumstances to take on the role of enlisted men, many gone missing on the battlefield, women had the chance to experience a series of liberating metamorphoses:

En efecto, durante la Primera Guerra las mujeres se cortan el pelo, se acortan las faldas para moverse con mayor facilidad; incluso se visten con pantalones para poder trabajar mejor en las fabricas. Tan pronto como empieza la guerra, las mujeres adquieren una gran independencia; se ven obligadas de moverse solas, sin acompañante, cosa impensable hasta 1914<sup>3</sup>.

Although during the interwar period women underwent a crisis of conscience, generated, on the one hand, by their having been removed from the positions they used to hold during World War I and by the social pressure asking of them to resume their traditional duties, and, on the other hand, by their inability to return to their previous statuses of wives, daughters, sisters or mothers without husbands, fathers, brothers or sons, the first steps towards their independence had already been taken. Gradually, feminine identity stopped defining itself against masculine identity, both

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<sup>1</sup> Aránzazu Usandizaga Sainz, "La mujer y la Primera Guerra Mundial", *Sobre la guerra y la violencia en el discurso femenino (1914–1989)*, ed. Rosa Rius Gatell (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 2006), 88.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Schoentjes, *Fictions de la Grande Guerre. Variations littéraires sur 14-18* (Paris: Editions Classiques Garnier, 2009), 179.

<sup>3</sup> Aránzazu Usandizaga Sainz, "La mujer y la Primera Guerra Mundial", 87.

for the women who had lived through the Great War at home, without men, and for those who had experienced the war first-hand, as nurses on the frontline, in the presence of mutilated bodies. This dislocation of identity is analysed by Sharon Ouditt<sup>4</sup> and synthesised by Mary Borden's famous interrogation: "There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? They are heads and knees and mangled testicles"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, by mining the ancestral male-female dialectic, World War I has triggered the rebirth of women as individuals, enabling them to open doors hitherto closed, even in the field of literary (or non-literary) creation:

As women moved onto occupations previously closed to them, they began to describe in writing all those areas that had traditionally been off-limits. Women covered wars for their newspapers, wrote war propaganda for their governments, published their wartime diaries, described fighting against men. They used their wartime experiences for their fictions and poetry, choosing the right to *imagine* war, just as men for centuries had written about war without actually experiencing it<sup>6</sup>.

As for the impact of World War II on the development of women's self-awareness and on their role in society, it seems to subscribe to a logic of repetition, to follow the pattern that had emerged during World War I. As if the experience of the previous events had done nothing to change the collective mentality, the propaganda of the fourth decade of the twentieth century relied, just the same, on using the resourcefulness of women in tough times. Consequently, the same call for the immediate mobilization of women on all the levels of public life was followed, at the end of the war, by the same urge to return to their traditional role and duties. As Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig noted,

As far as women were concerned the fiction of the Second World War largely reflected the pattern of 1914–1918. Official propagandists and popular novelists joined forces to urge housewives out of their homes into war work of incredible diversity and challenge. Then, when the war ended, the media began once again to harp on traditional concepts to encourage women to give up ideas on independence and ambitions unrelated to the domestic sphere<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women. Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Borden, "Moonlight", *The Forbidden Zone* (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1929), 60.

<sup>6</sup> Sayre P. Sheldon ed., *Her War Story. Twentieth Century Women Write about War* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), XI.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Cadogan, Patricia Craig, *Women and children first. The Fiction of Two World Wars* (London: Victor Gollancz LTD., 1978), 12.

Given the earth-shattering burst of emancipation of 1914–1918, with its reverberations during the interwar period, after World War II, the withdrawal of women from the public sphere and their confinement to anonymity was no longer possible, all the more so when it came to their literary activity, which had offered them visibility and even prestige, in most cultures of the world.

War is a frequent theme in the work of women poets in the early part of the twentieth century, even if their notoriety does not stem from this particular concern since, generally, regardless of the status of the author (combatant or civilian professional writer, combatant or civilian amateur writer, man or woman) there were very few literary works valuable enough to survive the immense ballast of war writing. Although explored by all of the literary genres, the theme of war is more present in poetry, especially during the period of mobilization and the years of actual conflict (1914–1918 and 1939–1945, respectively). This can be attributed to the economy of the genre, to the power of poetry to encapsulate the emotion of the moment, to be published and easily memorised or inserted in the frequent epistolary exchanges of the time. Consequently, the emergence of this theme in the poetry written by women is not surprising, not even for Romanian literature, which had not yet developed a paradigm of women's writing in the first half of the twentieth century, but had only known isolated cases of literary affirmation. Given the general rate of illiteracy of approximately 60 % in 1900 in the Romanian territories and of 30.9% among women in 1948,<sup>8</sup> the derisory representation of women in literature is explicable, especially if coupled with the authority of male literary criticism at the time. Particularly eloquent in this regard remain the openly misogynistic remarks in G. Călinescu's *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [*The History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*]:

A woman lives in society, with the role of producing individuals. This is why feminine literature has two directions that can be easily classified: there are the moral women, who write about their love for children, about domestic and civic virtues, and about love as an institution, but rarely about their homeland, which represents an ideal sometimes dangerous to the lives of their children and contrary to the selfishness of mothers; and, finally, there are the purely physiological women, like the Countess of Noailles, who

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<sup>8</sup> Anton Golopenția, D. C. Georgescu, "Populația Republicii Populare Române la 25 ianuarie 1948. Rezultatele provizorii ale recensământului" (The population of the Romanian People's Republic on 25 January 1948. The provisional results of the census), *Probleme economice* 2 (March 1948), 24.

write unrestrainedly about their desire for copulation, about their longing to be loved by man and to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh.<sup>9</sup>

However, an analysis devoid of gender prejudice might find Călinescu's taxonomy rather hasty and reductive, since it ignores the fact that, in spite of the inchoate stage of the tradition of Romanian feminine poetry and, consequently, of the often naïve poetic expression, the homeland as an ideal appears in the verses of Romanian women poets rather frequently, as early as the second half of the nineteenth century. **Carmen Sylva (1843–1916)**<sup>10</sup>, for example, recalls the War of Independence in her poems ("From Plevna, creeping in and out of ditches/ The valiant Turks like shadows, barefoot and dragging chains,/ Keep coming, hungered, crippled, a limping string of sorrows,/ They crawl, the wretched, and barely, barely they trudge along."<sup>11</sup>), **Matilda Cugler-Poni (1851–1931)** pleads for national unity ("Let us get together, old and young/ Man, child, or woman, doesn't matter / And an oblation, from our heart,/ We each should offer, for the better// Let us get together, old and young,/ We all who share the dire hatred/ For the ruthless enemy thug/ Of all Romanian and sacred!"<sup>12</sup>), and **Maria Cunțan (1862–1935)** dedicates her texts to both past wars, such as the War of Independence, ("Our footmen stand adamantine/ Across the Danube, on the bridge/ Their rifles pointing to the sky/ Their gaze to the horizon's fringe"<sup>13</sup>) and future battles. Relevant on this line is the poem titled

<sup>9</sup> George Călinescu, "Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu", *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (The history of Romanian literature from its origins to the present) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1988), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 737–738. In the original: "O femeie trăiește în societate, ea însăși fiind producătoare de indivizi. De aceea literatura feminină are două aspecte ce se pot reduce ușor la unitate: sunt femeile de tipul moral, care cântă iubirea de copii, virtuțile casnice și civice și dragostea ca o instituție, mai rar însă patria, aceasta fiind o idealitate uneori primejdioasă pentru viața copiilor, contra sentimentului egoist de mamă; sunt în sfârșit femeile de tipul curat fiziologic, cum era Contesa de Noailles, care cântă fără acoperământ dorința de împreunare, aspirația de a fi iubită de bărbat și bucuria de a trăi trupestă." [All quotations, if not marked otherwise, are translated by Amelia Precup]

<sup>10</sup> Literary pseudonym of Queen Elisabeta of Romania.

<sup>11</sup> See Carmen Sylva, "Plevna", *Versuri alese* (Selected poems) (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1998), 99–100. In the original: "Din Plevna se strecoară și ies după șanțuri,/ Viteji turci ca umbre, desculți și purtând lanțuri,/ Tot ies, flămânzi și schilavi, șireag după șireag,/ Se târâie, sârmanii, d-abea numai se trag."

<sup>12</sup> Matilda Cugler-Poni, "Să fim uniți" (Let us be united), in Idem, *Scrieri alese* (Selected poems) (Iași: Junimea, 1971), 53. In the original: "Să fim uniți cu mic, cu mare,/ Fie bărbat, copil, femeie./ Obolul său azi fiecare/ Cu toată inima să-l deie// Să fim uniți cu mic, cu mare,/ Cu toți acei care urăsc/ Pe-acel dușman, fără cruțare,/ A tot ce-i sfânt și românesc!"

<sup>13</sup> Maria Cunțan "La Dunăre" (By the Danube), in Idem, *Din caierul vremii* (From the distaff of time) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1916), 43–44. "Stau Dorobanții cei de fer/ La Dunăre pe podul mare,/ Ținându-și armele spre cer/ Se uită neclintiți în zare".

„Carmen Sylvei” [*To Carmen Sylva*], in which Maria Cunțan, future daughter of charity, foresees the danger to which Romanians would be exposed during World War I, and tries to poise it with a pacifistic attitude: “I’ve lived so long throughout the fighting/ Crossing the path of heavy duty/ Th’uninterrupted separation/ Of the realms of my own country./ I’ve dipped my pen for far too long/ In incessant tears and woe .../ Heaven forbid that fate should settle/ For brother to meet brother in battle.”<sup>14</sup> This attitude is in direct opposition to that of the author’s earlier poems, which show her commitment to the mobilization discourse: “Up your pace, army/ It’s our turn/ We are the scouts/ Of this land belov’d/ ... Hurry, great army/ Or your colours to us give”<sup>15</sup>. However, later Cunțan becomes aware of the bitter irony of fate that would eventually make “brother meet brother in battle”, in 1916, when the Kingdom of Romania joined forces with the Allies, while Transylvania was still under the Austro-Hungarian empire. Although isolated, the transformation is illustrative of the way in which the literary perspective upon war changes everywhere in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, a departure from the spirit of the nineteenth century which, as Luc Resson argues, « n’est guère pacifiste en littérature. La légende napoléonienne pèse sur la génération romantique qui regrette la gloire passée, et le réveil des nationalités opprimées ne contribue pas, cela va de soi, au rêve de la paix universelle »<sup>16</sup>. In line with this European tendency of permeating literary works with a pacifist spirit during World War I, Maria Cunțan’s work heralds a vein of pacifism in the war poetry written by Romanian women poets, which would become more apparent and better configured during World War II. Hardly visible at the outbreak of the Great War – an event that human naiveté endows with positive connotations, calling it “the war to end all wars” and promoting it with delirious enthusiasm – this pacifistic impetus emerges only after the horrors of the military conflict have shattered the trust in the myth of the technological and scientific progress of humanity.

As a matter of fact, the specific situation of the Romanian provinces, still separated in 1914, was unlikely to encourage pacifism. On the contrary, the discourse promoted at the time was one of active engagement in a world war that was expected to lead to the achievement of the national reunification ideal, which eventually happened through the Great Union of 1918. Under these circumstances,

<sup>14</sup> Cunțan, “Carmen Sylvei” (For Carmen Sylva), Idem, *Din caierul vremii*, 284. In the original: “Am petrecut atâta luptă/ În calea datoriei grele,/ E despărțire ne’nteruptă/ Pe plaiurile țării mele./ Mi-adăp cântările de-o vreme/ În lacrimile necurmăte .../ Ferească cerul – nu ne chieime/ Soarta la puști – frate cu frate.”

<sup>15</sup> Cunțan, “Cântecul cercetașilor” (The scouts’ song), Idem, *Din caierul vremii*, 35–36. In the original: “Grăbește oaste pașii/ ca să venim la rând,/ Noi suntem cercetașii/ Acestui drag pământ/ ... Grăbește oaste mare/ ori dă-ne steagul tău”.

<sup>16</sup> Luc Resson, *Ecrire contre la guerre: littérature et pacifismes. 1916–1938* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 23.

the militant drive of the Romanian women poets of French expression reflects the general mood of the day better. Their verses encourage going to war even during the years of neutrality of the Kingdom of Romania. A poem such as *Sus, națiune!* [*Rise, Nation!*], dated April 1915, presents **Elena Văcărescu (1864–1947)** as a poet engaged in war propaganda: “Rise, Great Nation, break your iron chains, break free!/ Every second to the brave its duration gladly gives;/ With the canon’s shots the eagle to its triumph speeds./ And the oaks in the great forest change their leaf to laurel wreaths! // ... Oh, my countrymen, your eyes see and reunite it all/ The black sparks and the blue lightening – from Traian and Decebal”<sup>17</sup>. Unlike **Anna de Noailles (1876–1933)** – author of an ample cycle of poems inspired by World War I<sup>18</sup> that contradict Călinescu’s labelling her a “purely physiological” poet – for whom the homeland of wartime is France, not Romania, Elena Văcărescu always associates the notion of military conflict with the much wanted unification of the Romanian provinces. Her political activity as secretary general of the Romanian Association to the United Nations during the interwar period is perfectly attuned to her literary activity and retrospectively explains the political engagement of her writing: “My country’s heavy burden I love so much to sing,/ Its fervent, painful passion is what enhances me/ (...) I cannot be myself, my country, I am you”<sup>19</sup>. In the light of numerous other texts that are definitely worthy of becoming the object of future research, the Romanian women poets of French expression differentiate themselves from the pacifist orientation very timidly tackled by Romanian literature during World War I, but thoroughly explored during World War II, and later under the communist propaganda.

A notable exception among the pacifist-minded pro-soviet women poets, **Anișoara Odeanu (1912–1972)**, a representative of the 1927 generation, better known for her prose work, published in 1943 a volume of poetry eloquently entitled *Moartea în cetate*<sup>20</sup> [*Death in the Citadel*]. Neither pacifist and pro-communist, nor advocating the Legionnaire Movement (as could be speculated based on the writer’s publishing activity), the poems collected in this volume impress with the consistency of their lyrical finesse ceaselessly refusing to be subjugated to the brutality of the

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<sup>17</sup> Elena Văcărescu, “Sus, națiune!” (Rise, nation!), in Idem, *Țara mea* (My country) (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1977), 48. In the original: “Sus, măreață Națiune, frânge-ți lanțurile de criță!/ Orice clipă care trece, fie una de viteaz;/ Când obuzul pleacă iute, vulturul e-n biruință./ Codrii de stejari în lauri ramul să-și preschimbe azi!// (...) O, poporul meu, privirea ta cea ageră adună/ Sclipăt negru, albastru fulger – din Traian și Decebal (...)”.

<sup>18</sup> See Anna de Noailles, “*La guerre*”, *Les forces éternelles* (Paris: Arthème Fayard & Cie, 1920).

<sup>19</sup> Elena Văcărescu, “Eu și țara mea” (My country and I), in Idem, *Țara mea* (My country), 106–110. In the original: “Povara țării mele îmi place mult s-o cânt,/ Prin forța ei fierbinte și dureroasă cresc,/ (...) Nu pot să fiu eu însămi, o, țara mea, sunt tu.”

<sup>20</sup> Anișoara Odeanu, *Moartea în cetate* (Death in the citadel) (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1943), 25.



events: "Oh, closed are all our paths/ Dead like our hearts/ Oh, haunted are our roads/ By the great winds/ And washed by tears of lost souls"<sup>21</sup>. Combining resignation and hope, Anișoara Odeanu's war poems do not explore the theme of war in itself, but love in the time of war for the man on the front, be it brother ("My brother's brow who will caress?/ He's put on sad and withered dress/ For his long journey. (...)/ So many songs will fill the air this autumn,/ The trees will flinch at so much death/ And will no longer find their heart to follow."<sup>22</sup>) or lover: "Oh, the hour still untimely is for love./ The prince of mountains still asleep. Clouds over his brow still lord/ On the flags of royal triumph,/ The holy blazons blaze in blood.// (...) 'No, still not the time for love, my fair./ In the enchanted forest, you hear the cavalcade?/ My arm fused with my sword, your body can't embrace/ My eyes ablaze with lightning, how can they see your face?'/ In the deep dark night of autumn,/ Your steps vanish in the dreary wind of dusk/ Towards the woods raging with the battle's bark."<sup>23</sup> Most of these poems are set in a fantastic realm under the dominion of death, which becomes an obstacle in the path of love. Death, however, is shaped by the poetic imagination as a timeless, mythological fatality, and not so much as a trauma of the historical present: "Tell me if my lover, his arms melded to sword,/ Will climb up to legends, stars paving his road,/ Or if his young footstep down has to come,/ With the rays of sunshine, to fall on my path? (...) Yet you keep silent; the night heavy as if all/ The nights since the beginning of the world/ Have flown into this, weary and alone."<sup>24</sup> Without being pacifistic in declamation, Anișoara Odeanu's poems remain peaceful in essence. Her poetic work leaves no trace of resentment against the war that had mercilessly amputated society, but releases a sadness

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<sup>21</sup> Odeanu, "Moartea în cetate", in Odeanu, *Moartea în cetate*, 25. In the original: "O, toate drumurile sunt închise/ Cu inimile oamenilor, ucise,/ O, toate drumurile sunt străbătute/ De vânturile mari/ În care plâng sufletele oamenilor pierdute (...)"

<sup>22</sup> Odeanu, "Echinocțiu de toamnă" (Autumn equinox), in Odeanu, *Moartea în cetate*, 13. "Fruntea fratelui meu, cine s-o mai mângâie?/ Fratele meu a îmbrăcat cele mai vestejite straie/ De lungă drumeție. (...)/ Va fi atâta cântec în toamna târzie,/ Se vor speria copacii de morțile prea multe/ Și nu-și vor mai găsi inima să și-o asculte."

<sup>23</sup> Odeanu, "Întâlnire la miezul nopții" (Midnight meeting), in Odeanu, *Moartea în cetate*, 34. In the original: "O, pentru dragoste e astăzi prea devreme./ Craiul munților încă doarme. Pe fruntea lui se vântură norii/ Pe drapelele împărăteșilor victorii,/ Ard iarăși în sânge sfintele steme.// (...) «Nu, nu e ceasul dragostei, albă iubită./ Auzi pasul cavalcadelor în pădurea vrăjită?/ Cum să te cuprindă brațul meu, încremenit pe spadă?/ Ochii mei de fulger cum să te vadă?»// În adâncă noapte de toamnă,/ Pasul tău se pierde în vântul cu mohorâta zare/ Spre pădurile în care vujește lupta cea mare."

<sup>24</sup> Odeanu, "Îngerul morții" (The angel of death), in Odeanu, *Moartea în cetate*, 48. In the original: "(...) Spune-mi dacă iubitul cu brațul de spadă,/ Urcă-n legendă pe drumul de stele,/ Sau dacă pasul lui tânăr are să cadă,/ Cu acele soarelui, cândva pe potecile mele?/ (...) Nu spui nimic. Și noaptea e atât de grea/ De parcă toate nopțile de la-nceputul lumii/ S-au strâns trudite și înșingurate'n ea (...)"

sublimated in the fantastic register, where the death of the beloved often becomes litotes: "My hands are frozen,/ No love can make them warm,/ My hands are not frozen like hands that still live"<sup>25</sup>.

For **Magda Isanos (1916–1944)**, a poet who passed away a year before the end of the Second World War, at the age of only 28, peace is a clearly expressed desideratum: "I'm waiting for year one./ The year of peace among all nations./ The history's great slaughterhouse/ will be taken down./ My heart already whispers: Brother,/ forgive me for th'ancestral spite,/ and in the name of human sorrow,/ our hands let's unite./ (...) Hand in hand let's take down the slaughterhouses/ of history. Get out of the coffin/ and look: the sun rises..."<sup>26</sup> Although the premature departure of the writer discourages her being associated with the communist propaganda that escalated in the second half of the fifth decade, most of her war poems reveal a pacifist and progressive drive ("Don't forget, good people," (...)// Flags and hymns I've knitted,/ here, 'mongst scythes and sickles,/ only flags and hymns, for the dawn of Good"<sup>27</sup>), unseparated from the vindictive stance against those who legitimised the carnage of the innocents: "I've seen people going/ to war./ They were young peasants, half-naked,/ in freight cars, singing,/ lifeless, dreary songs. They're gone/ (...) Never to return. Rye/ and wheat they have become in Russia.// Meanwhile, at home,/ the ungrateful and the shameless/ gaudily the streets of the city roam./ They didn't even know for whom they died./ They were simple folk./ (...) When the wind sighs, I seem/ to hear songs, thousands of feet/ walking in step. The fools/ who died in Russia return,/ to try you, pig snout,/ war profiteer, rich overnight!// You should tremble with fear,/ It is the day of doom!"<sup>28</sup>. Abrupt and ruthless, the poet's

<sup>25</sup> Odeanu, "Întâlnirea iubitului" (Encountering the beloved), in Odeanu, *Moartea în cetate*, 48. In the original: "(...) Măinile mele sunt înghețate,/ Nicio dragoste nu le poate încălzi,/ Măinile mele nu-s înghețate ca mâinile vii (...)"

<sup>26</sup> Magda Isanos, "Aștept anul unu" (I await year one), in Idem, *Poezii* (Poems) (Bucharest: Minerva, 1974), 8. In the original: "Aștept anul unu./ Anul păcii între popoare./ Ale istoriei mari abatoare/ vor fi dărâmate./ Inima mea de pe-acum murmură: Frate,/ iartă-mă pentru urile strămoșești,/ și'n numele suferințelor omeneste,/ dă-mi mâna./ (...) Dă-mi mâna să dărâmăm abatoarele/ istoriei. Lești din sicriu/ și privește: răsare soarele..."

<sup>27</sup> Isanos, "Testament pentru fata mea" (Bequest for my daughter), in Idem, *Poezii*, 56. In the original: "Să nu uitați, oameni, (...)// Steaguri și imnuri am împletit,/ aici, printre coase și seceri,/ numai steaguri și imnuri, pentru zorile Binelui (...)"

<sup>28</sup> Isanos, "Am văzut și eu oameni plecând" (I've seen people going), in Idem, *Poezii*, 50. In the original: "Am văzut și eu oameni plecând/ la război./ Erau tineri țărani, jumătate goi,/ în vagoane de marfă, cântând,/ cântece monotone și triste. Plecau/ (...) Și nu s-au mai întors. Secară/ și grâu a crescut din ei în Rusia.// În vremea asta, acasă,/ se plimba arătoasă-n orașe/ nerușinarea și nemernicia./ Ei nici măcar nu știau pentru cine mor./ Erau numai simplu popor./ (...) Mie, când bate vântul, mi se pare/ că aud cântece, mulțimi de picioare,/ călcând în cadență. Nerozii/ care-au murit în Rusia, se'ntorc,/ să te judece, râț de porc,/ îmbogățitule de război!// Ai dreptate să tremuri,/ E ziua de-apoi!"

indictment is visionary – however ironical this might seem – as it anticipates the doom coming from Russia, with songs and feet walking in step, a real historical chapter, entitled *communism*, whose victims were not the ‘war profiteers’, but the entire Romanian people, for four decades.

Before being exposed as a bitter return of the repressed, the mirage of peace among nations fuelled the dreams of folk and the reveries of poets with the illusion of the original happiness: “Forgive me for th’ancestral spite./ Will you forget bad blood and step into my house,/ and share my meagre lunch,/ talk about a new age/ of love among people?”<sup>29</sup> The desire to re-humanise the world also influenced the literary and artistic expression, long rooted in aesthetics. From this perspective, Magda Isanos’ work enters the process of an ‘ethical’ rethinking of Romanian literature. As Eugen Negrici noted, Magda Isanos was between the poets who felt, in 1944, the guilt of their too long wander through the stellar spheres of poetry, far from human suffering.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting that, against this background, her poetry undergoes a change not only in theme (“The war started/ to reap innocent lives./ Black flag flying over the city/ Only the burning gave light; Children while playing would die./ Moms robbed of sons were watching/ me with burning eyes./ I was ashamed to write about flowers.”<sup>31</sup>), but also in the poetic formula that increasingly ignores metrical harmony and draws more on the economy of prose in an attempt to capture the narrative of the event as faithfully as possible. Thus, Isanos’ poetry fully assumes the author’s engagement, despite all of the aesthetic principles of highbrow literature: “So what if the warm blood of martyrs is shed?/ Poets, little you care/ About blood mixed with mud./ You sing the red of rose and poppy! But the other blood, so bright,/ of innocent victims?/ Let us search for it, search for it beneath,/ Lady Macbeth, her hands stained” (...)”<sup>32</sup>. It was an imperative thoughtless act in the name of human solidarity.

Immediately after having turned arms against Germany and signed the armistice with the USSR on 23 August 1944, Romania slowly entered a process of

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<sup>29</sup> Isanos, “Iartă-mă, frate” (Forgive me, brother), in Idem, *Poezii*, 30. In the original: “Iartă-mă pentru urile strămoșești./ Vrei peste sânge’n casă să pășești,/ să-mpărțim prânzul sărac,/ să vorbim despre noul veac/ al dragostei dintre oameni? (...)”

<sup>30</sup> Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism: 1948–1964* (Romanian literature under the communist regime: 1948–1964) (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Pro, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Isanos, “Am fost departe de oameni” (I have been far from people), 32–33. In the original: “(...) Războiul începea/ să secere viețile nevinovate./ Steag negru flutura peste cetate/ Incendiile numai, luminau; copii în toiul jocului mureau./ Mame jefuite de fii mă priveau/ cu ochi arzători./ Mi-era rușine să mai scriu despre flori (...)”

<sup>32</sup> Isanos, “Sângele” (The blood), in Idem, *Poezii*, 46. In the original: “Ce-i dacă se varsă sângele cald al martirilor?/ Poeților, nu-i un subiect pentru voi,/ sângele-amestecat cu noroi./ Cântați roșul macilor și-al trandafirilor!/ Dar celălalt sânge, atât de luminos,/ al victimelor nevinovate?/ Să-l căutăm, să-l căutăm pe jos,/ Lady Macbeth, cu mâinile pătate”

Sovietisation meant to allow, after the abdication of King Mihai I in December 1947, the official establishment of the communist regime for almost four decades. During this period, the communist propaganda encouraged anti-war literature for reasons of antifascism, thus facilitating the proliferation of pacifist poems written by women. **Maria Banuș (1914–1999)**, **Veronica Porumbacu (1921–1977)** or **Nina Cassian (1924–2014)**, to name just a few women poets, answered the imperatives of the propaganda and published numerous pacifist poems in the 1950s. Whether these works were the result of the personal convictions of the three Romanian writers of Jewish origin, or whether they were the expression of some sort of compromise with the communist authority so as to be allowed to continue to publish<sup>33</sup>, these poems eloquently add to the collection of Romanian pacifist poems authored by women. Although aesthetically unaccomplished, the war poems of these women poets are illustrative of how the experience of horridness became, at mid-century, a way of legitimizing the regime of terror, initially perceived as an epiphany. The harsh antithesis between the years of war and the dawn of communism, as reflected in the poems of **Maria Banuș** collected in the cycle *Cântec sub tancuri* [Song under tanks] (1940–1944), from the volume *Bucurie*<sup>34</sup> [Joy], serves as example on this line: “For whom?/ Th’ordeal, the exodus, the hunger./ For whom does the folk suffer? (...) We gave enough/ Life and blood,/ For a buffoon,/ Mellow harvest,/ For hollow nuts,/ Living limbs,/ For swastikas and claws,/ (...) So close the book/ Of blackness and gloom./ Listen, wanderer,/ The world’s not over,/ Love lightens you,/ Twining winds,/ The comrades of journey,/ Are comrades for good.”<sup>35</sup> This antithesis is reproduced in other poems of the volume, such as *Marș* or *Ana*, and can be easily recovered by the reader from the tension that builds between the antifascist texts (“The sleigh slides and skids,/ The wolf in snow feasts,/ Jerry in blood feasts,/ The sleigh slides and skids”<sup>36</sup>) alluding to anti-Semitic pogroms (“The butcher brands us in series/ With his hot iron, with death”<sup>37</sup>) and the pro-communist poems (“And our

<sup>33</sup> Nina Cassian’s debut volume of 1947 was considered “unprincipled” by the communists and led to the poet’s fall from grace until her “rehabilitation” of 1957. Therefore, between 1948 and 1957 she focused on children’s literature and militant poetry (including pacifist poems).

<sup>34</sup> Maria Banuș, *Bucurie* (Joy) (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură și Artă, 1949).

<sup>35</sup> Banuș, “Teroare” (Terror), in Idem, *Bucurie*, 55–56. In the original: “(...) Pentru cine?/ Foamea, chinul, exodul./ Pentru cine pătimește norodul?/ (...) Am dat destul ./ Sânge și viață,/ Pentru-o piață ./ Roade mustoase/ Pe nuci găunoase,/ Vii mădule./ Pe svastici și gheare,/ (...) Închide dar cartea./ Cea neagră și tristă./ Ascultă drumețele./ Lumea există,/ Te fulgeră dragostea,/ Unduie vânt,/ Tovarășii drumului,/ tovarășii sunt.”

<sup>36</sup> Banuș, “Cântec de leagăn (pentru copiii războiului)” (Lullaby for the children of war), in Idem, *Bucurie*, 50. In the original: “Trece sania, trece,/ Lupun’n zăpadă petrece,/ Neamțul în sânge petrece,/ trece sania, trece. (...)”

<sup>37</sup> Banuș, “Progrom” (Pogrom), in Idem, *Bucurie*, 51–52. In original: “(...) Pe rând călăul ne’nseamnă/ Cu fierul roșu, cu moarte”.

heart/ Beats under arms/ Always for peace/ Always for justice”<sup>38</sup>) that often valorise the new status of woman-citizen: “We, women who build, sow, master the tools/ Working hand in glove with our fellow man,/ (...) Wives and mothers, athirst for peace/ (...) We, women-citizens,/ We walk with the sun!”<sup>39</sup> Femininity is now put in the service of peace, just as it was put in the service of war during the years of mobilization.

The same acute sense of righteousness is also to be found in the poetry of **Veronica Porumbacu**, who prefers to use the second person singular, to configure an addressee as the recipient of an ample pacifist message anchored in exclamations that can be read as a refrain insisting on the woman’s duty to memorise the past in order to valorise the present: “What I’m telling you now is no story of horror,/ and your eyes, you well know, have seen it before./ My blood fills my words as it does with my core/ You must never forget what the past has in store!// The harsh icy vigil, has it turned you to floe?/ As the envelope came, death it brought to th’abode:/ Wait no more for your man, he is not coming home!.../ You must never forget what the past has in store!/ The very foundations of world what’s shaken?/ To ruins your house made of clay has been taken,/ and you, lost, with your infant wondering/ the cities burning!// In the granaries of death what’s been taken?/ The bones of man burnt in the oven,/ The long wailing the world’s taken over.../ You must never forget what the past has in store!/ (...) A ray the endless, deepest dark to brighten:/ The Soviet soldier, soothing the wounded’s torment”.<sup>40</sup> Similar to the work of Maria Banuș, in the poems written by Veronica Porumbacu after 1944 the recollection of the war refuses to circumvent references to the Shoah and imagines peace as a Soviet blessing. However, none of these notions is to be found in *cer de război* (*wartime sky*), a text written in 1942: “I thought the sky the quilt of the earth./ To fasten my gaze to its invisible nails – / an enormous land reveals itself/ furrowed by objects and grass./ (...) I’ve never known that on the street/ so many kinds of

<sup>38</sup> Banuș, “Pomenire (Tovarășilor căzuți)” (Memorial for the fallen brothers), in Idem, *Bucurie*, 66. In the original: “(...) Și inima noastră/ Sub arme când bate,/ E tot pentru pace/ și pentru dreptate”.

<sup>39</sup> Banuș, “Cântecul soarelui” (The song of the sun), in Idem, *Bucurie*, 99–100. In the original: “Noi, femei ce zidim, semănăm, stăpânim rostul uneltei/ Cot la cot cu tovarășul nostru, bărbatul,/ (...) Soții și mame însetate de pace/ (...) Noi, femei cetățene,/ mergem cu soarele!”

<sup>40</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, “Ține minte” (Remember), in Idem, *Anii aceștia. Versuri* (These years. Poems) (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură și Artă a Uniunii Scriitorilor din R.P.R., 1950), 23–24. In the original: “Ce-ți spun acum, nu-i poveste de groază,/ și ochilor tăi le-a fost dat s’o mai vază./ Azi sângele-mi bate ca’n vine’n cuvinte/ Ce-a fost, ține minte !// De ce te’nghetea veghea aspră, sticloasă ?/ Un plic se’nțorcea, era moartea pe masă:/ Să nu-ți aștepti omul de azi înainte!.../ Ce-a fost, ține minte!// Ce sgâlțâia’ncheieturile lumii?/ Casa-ți cădea în ruinele humii,/ și tu, răătăcită cu pruncul în fașe’n/ arzânde orașe!// Ce înghițeau ale morții hambare?/ Oasele omului ars în cuptoare,/ bocetul lung ce în spații se’nține.../ Ce-a fost, ține minte!// (...) O rază în noaptea cea fără de graniți:/ Ostașul sovietic cu pacea în raniți. (...)”

branches grow:/ (...) and draw on the cloth of the sky/ a chessboard/ whose pawns are the sparrows. // Below them/ soldiers, their heads on the sky,/ swinging their boots in the hollow of earth".<sup>41</sup> Metaphorical and elliptical, the description of the wartime sky as a chessboard whose pawns are the soldiers hidden by the sparrows is lyrical and thereby different from the anti-war poems that follow. Written in the middle of the Second World War, the text is, unfortunately, a lonely example of the way in which poetry could have genuinely explored the theme of war if the plague of militant art had not become a political panacea in Romania, in the second half of the last century.

After the public opprobrium triggered by her 1947 debut volume,<sup>42</sup> considered 'unprincipled' by the communist authorities, **Nina Cassian** resumes her activity as a poet with a series of militant verses meant to show her loyalty to the party. Therefore, many of her poems tackle the theme of healing the traumata of the war under the sign of socialist peace, since: "In the war, there was no home,/ no dark circles under eyelids,/ anywhere near not a soul,/ protected'gainst the agonies"<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, when tackling the theme of war, Nina Cassian's poems do not always refer to the years of the Second World War, the event closest to the moment of writing, but, at times, they return to the Great War, with the obvious purpose of eulogising the Bolshevik Revolution: "Lively year, nineteen seventeen!/ Like embers your cold autumn steams./ (...) On the frontline, soldiers lie in dampy tranches./ Hunger calms their hunger. Mire their thirst quenches./ (...) The thieves, the powers that be, the wealthy, all scared/ The wind of the Great Revolution they dread"<sup>44</sup> Nina Cassian's poems then move on to the Spanish Civil War with a view to denounce fascism ("Spain, oh, Spain/ (...) Ah, the calendar,/ Blooded leaves/ Takes back in time, afar/ To nineteen thirty-six,/ That's the starting point/ For a fascist

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<sup>41</sup> Porumbacu, *cer de război (wartime sky)*, in Idem, *Anii aceștia. Versuri*, 7–8. In the original: "Ceru-l credeam de mult plapuma pământului./ Să-mi agăț privirea de piroanele lui nevăzute – / mi se descoperă un pământ imens/ brăzdat de lucruri și plante./ (...) N-am știut că sunt pe o stradă/ atâtea feluri de crengi:/ (...) ce înseamnă pe fața de masă a cerului/ o tablă de șah/ ai cărei pionii sunt vrăbiile./ Sub ele/ soldați cu capul pe cer,/ bălăbănindu-și bocancii în golul pământului."

<sup>42</sup> See Nina Cassian, *La scara 1/1* (On a scale of 1/1) (Bucharest: Forum, 1947).

<sup>43</sup> Nina Cassian, "Vindecări" (Healings), in Idem, *Tinerete. Versuri alese* (Youth. Selected poems) (Bucharest: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1955), 207. In the original: "(...) În război, n-a fost casă mai ieri,/ fără cearcăn sub pleoape/ și nici suflet, aproape,/ ocolit de dureri".

<sup>44</sup> Cassian, "Înainte de semnal" (Before the signal), in Idem, *An viu nouă sute și șaptesprezece. Versuri alese* (Lively year nineteen seventeen. Selected poems), 27–29. In the original: "An viu, nouă sute și șaptesprezece!/ Frige ca jarul toamna ta rece./ (...) Pe front, zac soldații-n tranșee cu apă./ Îi satură foamea. Noroiul i-adapă./ (...) Tremură hoții, mai marii, avuții.../ Bate vântul Marii Revoluții".

horde/ Your body to burn/ And your flesh to claw"<sup>45</sup>) and eventually stop to the Second World War in order to mourn the massacred youth of the poet's generation: "You, my friends,/ The youth of the world,/ How many of you still in the tranches/ With no sweethearts nor names?// How many of you needlessly gone / Swept by the storm unjust,/ A cross stuck in your chest – / Token of your 'having been'?"<sup>46</sup> Love annihilated by war becomes a theme of reflection in Nina Cassian's poems and takes the shape of an ample lamentation of the woman who lost her lover in battle: "Hey!.../My swain was so tall.../ You, comrades, you knew him./ (...) And then? A night/ Darkest, quietest of all./ From the country's roof/ Roasted flames have burst/ A ditch has yawned the land/ The German death has spread/ (...) I could then hear the blast/ But no way I could know/ That dirt was filling up/ My swain's mouth, still alive... ".<sup>47</sup> Once again, womanhood leads to another indictment against the war, instead of searching for an original voice to express the truly ravishing feelings that the catastrophe of war must have aroused.

As evidenced by this study dedicated to the Romanian poetry inspired by the experience of the two world wars, identifying and exploring the feminine contribution to war poetry demonstrates its own legitimacy. Only captured in its pacifist dimension, the poetry of war written by women represents just one of the numerous research directions that the interest of specialists in the field has begun to readdress, at the confluence of literature and history. Thus, while historical approaches appeal to the Romanian poetry of war in order to explain aspects related to national identity,<sup>48</sup> literary approaches such as the present study draw on the historical context in order to elaborate and reflect upon some segments of Romanian poetry that had long been ignored. This overlooked category also includes war poetry, to which both men (either combatants or civilians) and women have

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<sup>45</sup> Cassian, "Dans popular spaniol" (Spanish folk dance), in Idem, *Horea nu mai este singur. Versuri alese* (Horea is no longer alone. Selected poems), 187–188. In the original: "Spanie, Spanie/ (...) Calendarul, hăt,/ File sângeroase/ Duce îndărăt/ Spre treizeci și șase,/ Pe când s-a pornit/ O fascistă hoardă,/ Trupul să-ți-l ardă,/ Carnea să-ți-o-mpartă (...)"

<sup>46</sup> Cassian, "Tineri din lumea întreagă!" (The youth of the world), in Idem, *Tinerețe*, 204. In the original: "(...) Voi, prietenii mei,/ Voi, tineri din lume,/ Câți ați rămas în tranșei/ Fără iubite și nume?// Câți ați pierit fără rost/ Sub vântul nedrept,/ Cu-o cruce bătută în piept –/ Semn că „ați fost”?...(..."

<sup>47</sup> Cassian, "Balada femeii care și-a pierdut iubitul în război" (The ballad of the woman who lost her husband in the war), in Idem, *Horea nu mai este singur*, 173–177. In the original: "Hei!.../ Era-nalt flăcăul meu.../ Voi, tovarăși, îl știți./ (...) Și apoi? A fost o noapte/ Neagră, surdă dintre toate./ Din acoperișul țării/ Zbucneau flăcările coapte/ se căsca în glie șanțul/ Prăvălise moarte neamțul/ (...) Auzeam bubuitura/ Nu puteam...atunci...să știu/ Că pământul umple gura/ Lui, iubitului, de viu... (...)"

<sup>48</sup> See Valentin Trifescu, "War Poetry: Identitarian Issues in the Poems Written on the Battlefield by Romanian Peasant Soldiers Fighting for the Austro-Hungarian Army", *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies* 7 (2015): 990–1002.

equally contributed. During the years of war, women's roles were extremely varied, which, as Nosheen Khan points out, accounts for the variety of stances they adopt as poets: "[w]omen poets see their roles variously as reporters, propagandists, interpreters, advocates, satirists, elegists, healers and visionaries, and their verse correspondingly expresses a comprehensive range of human emotions: pity, revulsion, horror, disgust, hate, anger, togetherness, isolation, love and compassion."<sup>49</sup> In an attempt to understand the way in which these emotions become essential attitudes in the evolution of the Romanian poetic forms and ideas, the present research takes a step forward over the sometimes problematic boundary between literature and history.

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<sup>49</sup> Nosheen Khan, *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 5.