

## THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN THE MEMORY OF ROMANIAN POETRY

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**Abstract:** Starting from the observation of the canonical periodisation of Romanian literature into *antebellum*, *interbellum*, and *postbellum*, this study aims for a critical recovery of the taboo segment, on *bellum* poetry, with a focus on Romanian poetry inspired by the First World War among war veteran writers. The goal is to prove that the careful analysis of Romanian war poetry can reveal not only the profile of a minor genre that is meant to record the seismic clash between man and history, but actually trace the path of a major search for language that is capable of expressing the magnitude of such a clash.

**Keywords:** First World War, Romanian poetry, Memory, Combatants, Stances, Irony

If the most traumatic events, as proven by research studies in Neurology, make for the most deep-seated memories, intensively stretching the human brain's capacity to encode,<sup>1</sup> then literature and by extension poetry, as the representation of the individual affective memory included in the patrimony of a people's cultural memory, could never avoid the thematisation of the experience of World War I in the context of Romanian culture, as is the case for several cultural areas. It would have been nearly impossible for the Great War, as it has been known in Francophone and Anglo-Saxon areas, or the War for the Nation's Reunion in the case of Romania, to irrigate with its unforeseen violence the imagination of poets who lived through it as combatants or civilians.

Although it has not been the topic of major recovery studies until now, Romanian poetry that has been inspired by The First World War impresses through the sheer number of poets who have given it voice. From professional combatant writers to professional civilian writers, from amateur combatant writers to amateur civilian writers, the variety in the authors' stances give life to the Romanian war poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, bringing together poets (Octavian Goga, George Topârceanu, Adrian Maniu, Ion Vinea, Ion Pillat, Vasile Voiculescu,

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<sup>1</sup> See Rémy Cazals, Frédéric Rousseau, *14-18, le cri d'une génération* (Toulouse: Éditions Privat, 2003), 48.

Aron Cotruș, Demostene Botez, Păstorel Teodoreanu, Artur Enășescu, Constantin Stoika, Andrei Naum etc.), future prose authors (Camil Petrescu), literary historians and critics (Dumitru Panaitescu – Perpessicius, Basil Munteanu, Nicolae Iorga, Ovid Densusișianu), lawyers (Vintilă Paraschivescu), career military men (Mircea Zorileanu) as well as simple peasants who imbue war songs with the emotional shock brought by the first carnage of technology.

As a matter of fact, the ravaging impact that the First World War had on the collective mentality is, before all else, due to this technological, mechanical aspect that transformed it, as Paul Fussell opined, into the most ironic war of all time, the painful expression of the collapse of one of modernity's greatest myths, that of social progress through science and technology: "The Great War was more ironic than any before or since. It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century. It reversed the Idea of Progress."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the First World War became the tragic peak of the Industrial Revolution that had been shaping the Western way of thinking since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, strengthening the trust in the progress brought on by science and technology throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and creating a secular, autotelic myth in a time that proclaimed, alongside Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>3</sup>, that God was dead. Alas, it was in 1914, which was, for many historians, the year the 20<sup>th</sup> century truly started, when scientific progress became social regress, and technological evolution became human involution. As such, the sinking of the ocean liner *Titanic* (the largest one in the world at the time) in April of 1912, was being interpreted as a metaphor anticipating the sinking of the melioristic myth of progress<sup>4</sup> that had been based on the positivism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the empiricism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Cartesianism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, going back all the way to anthropocentrism and the Renaissance. Failing with irrationality, the myth of reason that had forged the epistemological identity of the West for more than three centuries, would therefore undergo mutations at the level of the collective mentality and sensibility.

One of these mutations was the loss of the naivety of yesteryear, as the second reason for the Great War's ironic nature was, according to Paul Fussell, the innocence with which the people had greeted it. For it was not only a conflict they had apprehensively seen coming – in 1898, Jan Bloch published his *Budushchaia vayna v tekhnicheskoy, ekonomicheskoy i politicheskoy otnosheniakh* [*The War to come and its technological, economic, and political consequences*]<sup>5</sup>, and in 1912 Wilhelm Lamzus published *Das Menschenschlaughthaus* [*The Human Slaughterhouse*]<sup>6</sup> –, but one they optimistically welcomed for its "healing" properties by many idealists such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, Robert

<sup>2</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 8.

<sup>3</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Așa grăit-a Zarathustra*, trans. Ștefan Augustin Doinaș (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Christine Lombez, *La poésie moderne. Courants et méthode* (Paris: Editions du Temps, 1999), 8.

<sup>5</sup> See Jan Bloch, *The Future of War: In Its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations*, trans. R.C. Long (Boston: The International Union Ginn&Company, 1899).

<sup>6</sup> See Wilhelm Lamzus, *The Human Slaughter-House*, trans. Oakley Williams (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913).

Musil, Hugo von Hofmannsthal etc. The idyllic summer before the war had itself become a metaphor for the innocence lost and replaced, after 1918, with a “winter of spirit”,<sup>7</sup> a disillusioned vision of the world, a synonym for either irony (for Hofmannstahl<sup>8</sup>) or cynicism (for a contemporary philosopher like Pieter Sloterdijk<sup>9</sup>).

Regardless, following the blind trust in the myth of progress and the naivety of believing in the curative properties of an armed conflict, the third element that served to fulfil the ironic cruelty of the First World War was the quasi-unanimous conviction that it would be the last. The first world-wide conflagration, the so-called “La der des ders” (“la dernière guerre des dernières”) or “The War to end all Wars”, was meant, by virtue of its global scale, to end humanity’s string of wars. Far from ending the history of previous wars, however, in reality, through its sheer magnitude, the First World War commenced the string of modern, industrialized wars, inaugurating the apocalypse through the mass production of metals and biotechnology.

In light of these aspects, we may affirm that the study of poetry inspired by the experiences of the First World War has already confirmed – especially, but not only, in French, German, and Anglo-Saxon literature – that the evolution of the genre faithfully mirrors the evolution of the collective mentality in regards to the great conflict. Thus, as Nicolas Beaupré showcases, the fact that in Germany “over one and a half million poems were sent to be published in newspapers during the month of August 1914 alone”<sup>10</sup> paints a convincing picture of both the trust that civil society put on the virtues of war, as well as their naivety, as civilians (mothers, wives, or children of the troops) were being served poetry of propaganda. Equally, the incremental abandonment of poetry coupled with the predilection towards prose that culminated in the disappearance of war poetry after the Second World War, is proof of the loss of innocence and sensibility, but also of the failure of poetry in (still) being able to capture the tragic epic of the battlefield.

From this point of view, the production of poetry during the First World War is quantitatively imposing, even though, qualitatively, it passes as “filler” for the most part, due to a series of reasons: the idealism of the year 1914, reflected in the numerous voluntary enrolments of writers everywhere; the end of the “preferential recruitment” period

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Atkin, *A War of Individuals. Bloomsbury attitudes to the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 229.

<sup>8</sup> See Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “L’ironie des choses”, *appendix* in Pierre Schoentjes, “Image de la Grande Guerre en Sainte Farce”, in *Mythe et création. Théorie, figures*, ed. Eléonore Faivre d’Arcier, Jean-Paul Madou, Laurent Van Eynde (Bruxelles: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critica rațiunii cinice*, vol. I, trans. Tinu Pîrvulescu (Iași: Polirom, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Nicolas Beaupré, *Ecrire en guerre, écrire la guerre. France-Allemagne 1914-1920* (Paris : CNRS Editions, 2006), 28. [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>1</sup> that had previously allowed the social and intellectual elite to dodge military service; and the fundamental part that literature played in communicating the battlefield experience during an age when cinema was barely two decades old, the first radio broadcast was not even one decade old, and television would wait another one and a half decades before their first transmission.

What is most impressive about the Romanian poetry of the First World War is not the quantity – since Romanian literature had neither the capacity for propaganda that other European cultures employed, nor the high percentage of literacy of countries such as France (98%), who were able to formally reproduce the proper forms of poetry (elegies, odes, hymns etc.) – nor the quality either – since there is no actual opus of Romanian war poetry to talk about, or any remarkable representative to innovate the genre, unlike Guillaume Apollinaire in French literature. Therefore, the only defining characteristic of Romanian war poetry that remains is the diversity of the authors' stances that contributed to the configuration of the affective memories of the Great War into the tablature of poetry writing. And since the most remarkable poetic achievements, among all, are those written by combatants, creating a thorough inventory of their creations is a legitimate task.

### The Poets

The numerous Combatant-poets or Poet-Combatants,<sup>2</sup> are those who transform their experience on the battlefield into verse that they carry with them through trenches or that they commit to paper after the fact, perhaps in an attempt to domesticate the memories of the violence they lived through, or simply to deny this violence from being committed to memory. That being said, if literary orientation were relevant when it comes to the democratization of the experiences generated by the war, then we might say that, of all Romanian combatant-poets, it was the traditionalists who have been the most productive during the First World War. Perhaps, due to the influence of their heightened sensibility towards matters of ethnicity and society, traditionalist poets, particularly the ones affiliated with magazines such as “Gândirea” and “Viața românească”, were galvanized to write for periodicals and compile entire volumes of poetry dedicated to the Great War. One of these volumes is *The Land of the Bison*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1918 by **Vasile Voiculescu**, a poet who served as a battle medic and the head of a field hospital on the Moldavian battlefield during the First World War. Usually in the first person plural (“As Neculuț the shepherd reached his time to die / We had started mounting our attack downhill./ In a thousand fragments broke the ceiling of the sky/ And over us, over our path, they fell.”, *The time of Neculuț*<sup>4</sup>), Vasile Voiculescu's war

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<sup>1</sup> Olivier Parenteau, *Quatre poètes dans la Grande Guerre. Apollinaire, Cocteau, Drieu la Rochelle, Éluard* (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2014), 11. [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>2</sup> See Corina Croitoru, “Combattants-poètes et poètes-combattants dans la Roumanie de la Grande Guerre”, *Romania Orientale* XXVIII (2015): 167-180.

<sup>3</sup> See Vasile Voiculescu, *Din țara zimbrului și alte poezii* (Bârlad: Tipografia C. D. Lupașcu, 1918).

<sup>4</sup> “Când a fost să moară Neculuț ciobanul/Tocmai o pornisem la atac pe vale./ Cerul parcă-n țândări își surpa tavanul/ Și-l lăsa să cadă peste noi în cale” (*Când a fost să moară Neculuț*). [t. Ș.P.]

poetry uses some of the best known tropes of patriotic poetry, such as the redemptive collective sacrifice ("And then Bucovina and Banat stood tall/ [...] The voice was of Ardeal, and Nistru our words gave:/ We're either all one country/ Or we're all one grave.", *The night we went to war*<sup>5</sup>) or the silent individual sacrifice ("As he lay dying midst the carrion, oblivious of his own demise/ the sundered sentry did slowly concede to his death...", *It was a day of battle*<sup>6</sup>), and the messianic journey of a warrior that culminates in redemption ("There are so many missing, but do not cry,/ Today the path of sacrifice is closing:/ Though crippled, stained with blood/ We all end up in Bethlehem.", *To the country*<sup>7</sup>). Most of his poetry about war paints a religious picture which, paradoxically enough, lacks the preoccupation with the fact that the victory they covet is won, in fact, not by risking one's own life, but by taking another's; "you cannot speak of all that is abject about war, and not denounce the pawns that serve its purpose"<sup>8</sup> summing up one of the inherent dilemmas of war literature. **Ion Pillat**, all while focusing his efforts on the Moldavian battlefield like Vasile Voiculescu before him, would prove himself better attuned to the sensibilities of human tragedy with his volume *The Walled Garden*,<sup>9</sup> which he had written during the war, while on leave from Miorcani: "Two people think to end each other's lives/ In two homes, two languages, at once,/ At the window, two children and the lily of the moon,/ The same, in their clean, tiny robe,/ They pray, God, please help their father, // Two people think to end each other's lives. // And in two homes, two mothers mourn/ And to icons turn for mercy.. / Now dawn. Attack. The trenches are being torn/ Under the bleeding of our only sky." (*Two people think...*<sup>10</sup>). Thus, to Pillat, suffering becomes the only real identity of all soldiers during war time, their path is rid of godliness for as long as they are in battle, stuck in a game of hazards that unconsciously manipulates the fates of men turned lead soldiers: "What child-god bows over toy-people/ And in the evening, throwing them in black boxes,/ In trenches burying the wax puppets." (*Lead Soldiers*<sup>11</sup>).

In condemnation of the Kingdom of Romania's neutrality during the first two years of the war, **Octavian Goga** lent his poetry in service to the Transylvanian cause, not counting himself among the Romanian soldiers sent to fight alongside the Austro-Hungarian army after

<sup>5</sup> "Atunci Bucovină, Banat se-nălțară/ [...] Glas dete Ardealul și Nistrul cuvânt:/ Sau toți pretutindeni o singură Țară,/ Sau toți un mormânt!" (*Noaptea mobilizării*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>6</sup> "Trântit acolo printre leșuri, el nu-și simțea păcăginierea/ Ci s-a lăsat domol să moară înstrăinatul grănicer..." (*Era o zi de bătălie*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>7</sup> "Lipsește atâția, dar nu plânge,/ Azi calea jertfei o-ncheiem:/ Deși schilozi, stropiți de sânge,/ Intrăm și noi în Betleem" (*Țării*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Godo, *Pourquoi nous battons-nous? 1914-1918 : les écrivains face à leur guerre* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 2014), 154. [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>9</sup> See Ion Pillat, *Grădina între ziduri: poezii* (Bucharest: Soccec, 1920).

<sup>10</sup> "Doi oameni stau cu gând să se omoare// În două case, -n două limbi, deodată,/ În geam cu crinul lunei doi copii,/ La fel în cămășuța lor curată,/ Se roagă, Doamne, tatăl lor să-l ții, // Doi oameni stau cu gând să se omoare. // Și-n două case, două mame plâng/ Și la icoane îndurare cer.../ În zori. Atac. Tranșeele se frâng/ Sub sângerarea unui singur cer." (*Doi oameni stau...*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>11</sup> "Ce zeu-copil se-aleacă pe oameni-jucării/ Și seara, răsturnându-i în negrele cutii,/ Îngroapă în tranșee păpușile de ceară?" (*Soldați de plumb*). [t. Ș.P.]

1914, but volunteering to join the Romanian army in 1916, when the Crown Council declared that Romania was to join the war on the side of the Entente Powers. The 1916 volume *Songs of no country*,<sup>12</sup> a testament to Octavian Goga's political creed, reveals a resentful identity to which Romania's period of neutrality represents the betrayal of his Transylvanian brethren ("– I am Ardeal,/ With his faith the age of a millennium,/ And from the German side/ I too came to the dance." *The Palace Dance*<sup>13</sup> [or as it was titled initially, *A neutral romance*]), and to which the peace was a painful silence underlined by the tears of Transylvanians who were sent to fight in the service of the Empire ("It would've liked to punish me,/ Some wind, a bearer of news/ He tore one old Romanian ballad/ From the German trenches", *The Mutism of Peace*<sup>14</sup>). Goga's *War*, published posthumously in his volume of poetry *Country Wide*<sup>15</sup>, is a collection of texts from his years of experience on the battlefield that are marked either by a tone reminiscent of Alecsandri (*The Dance of death*), or a unique, heroically elegiac timbre (*A story of old*). Also heroic and elegiac is the tone of the poems of **Aron Cotruș**, from his volume *The Celebration of death*,<sup>16</sup> a Transylvanian poet who served in the Austro-Hungarian military and was sent on the Italian front that he, allegedly, deserted, in order to join the Allies: "Quick fallbacks, immense victories,/ Uneasiness in villages and cities.../ And wounds, deep wounds, and mourning.../ Today, one cry, tomorrow, victorious marches." (*No chanced matter*<sup>17</sup>). Solemn and passionate, the rich poetry of Aron Cotruș capture both the condemned condition of a soldier, forced to fight for a cause that does not belong to them ("I'm leaving here, as if tomorrow,/ Longside the mighty of Ardeal.../ [...] I leave alike the morrow,/ With slaves and masters too." *I leave here tomorrow*<sup>18</sup>), as well as the universal condition of the anonymous soldier, sacrificed to no avail ("He fell on grounds churned with blood,/ He fell mortally wounded,/ His thought back to his mother, who now for him is mourning", *Wounded*<sup>19</sup>).

Alongside these Transylvanian and Wallachian poets, Moldavian native **Demostene Botez**, from whom we only have his youthful writings left, creates poetic discourse that strengthens the statement that war literature "should often see itself as a burial ritual",<sup>20</sup> as

<sup>12</sup> See Octavian Goga, *Cântece fără țară* (Bucharest: C. Sfetea, 1916).

<sup>13</sup> "– Sunt Ardealul,/ Cu credința-i de-un mileniu,/ Și din tabăra nemțească/ Am venit și eu la bal..." (*Bal la palat*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>14</sup> "Ori vrând ca să mă pedepsească,/ Vreun vânt aducător de vești,/ A smuls o doină românească/ De prin tranșeele nemțești" (*În pacea mută*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>15</sup> See Octavian Goga, *Din larg: poeme postume* (Bucharest: Editura Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă „Regele Carol II”, 1939).

<sup>16</sup> See Aron Cotruș, *Poezii* (Timișoara: Editura Helicon, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> "Retrageri iuți, învingeri uriașe,/ Neliniște-n sate și orașe.../ Și rane, rane-adânci și jale.../ Azi, plânset, mâne, marșuri triumfale" (*Nu fu-ntâmplare...*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>18</sup> "Ca mâne plec de-aici,/ Cu ultimii Ardealului voinici.../ [...] Mă duc ca mâni,/ Cu slugi și cu stăpâni..." (*Ca mâne plec de-aici*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>19</sup> "Căzu pe pustă frământată-n sânge,/ Căzu rănit de moarte,/ Gândindu-se la mama care-l plânge" (*Rănitul*).

<sup>20</sup> Carine Trevisan, *Les fables du deuil. La grande guerre: mort et écriture* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), 199. [t. Ș.P.]

shown in the verses from his volume *The Earth's Flower*<sup>21</sup>: "Earth, you're closing in on me!/ I feel the dark walls burying us,/ And in this small and damp enclosure/ We crawl as helplessly as bugs" (*From shelter (to battle)*)<sup>22</sup>. In one of the best war poems from this author or perhaps the whole genre, The lyrical subject rebuilds their relation with divinity on the foundation of a superior irony which inverts the power positions, creating a sublime invitation to solidarity through sacrifice: "Arise anew, once more these daring days/ When thousands Gods in ground are lain,/ Come down alone the celestial scale/ And die a human, by the side of them.// They are without crosses or tombstones/ On vast fields, on the side of roads,/ Marking but a fistful of remains/ With which they wrote a creed of gospels.// No Lazarus will be reborn today,/ Through no miracle the blind will see/ And nothing else but dirt, this clay/ And Thomas disbelieves of thee.// [...] Come down into my country's grave/ Where atom by atom we have suffered,/ Where so many a star have fallen...// It is more godly to die a human." (*Christ*)<sup>23</sup>. A witness of the desecration of the world and a disbeliever of miracles, the poet develops his apostate discourse outside of the spiritual obedience of the traditionalists, being thus extremely modern in his articulation of irony.

The eclectic poet **Adrian Maniu** – a volunteer on the front both during the Bulgarian campaign (1913), as well as between 1916–1918 – illustrates a similar perspective in the series *The War* which he published in *Gândirea* between 1921 and 1922, and later included in the volume *The Nation's Book* in 1934, and in *Songs of love and death*,<sup>24</sup> a year after that. Moderately expressionist, the poem *Oh so late* depicts the same kind of democratization of the condition of the believer created by the tragedy of war, emphasizing as a counter-point the fact that the death of so many innocent soldiers mirrors the impossibility of the resurrection of the Redeemer: "Mary, stop looking for your boy/ Your son has died for us all,/ From his grave he can't return,/ Not by your hand, or by another's, for so was told.// [...] His bone, the same a stranger's bone;/ How like a droplet, all the droplets are./ The heart by plough asunder torn,/ Peacefully suckled on by weeds."<sup>25</sup> At the same time, his message captures the ironic delusion of the soldier, which can be identified in his descriptions of the harrowing marches ("We are a

<sup>21</sup> See Demostene Botez, *Floarea pământului* (Iași: Viața românească, 1920).

<sup>22</sup> "Pământule, ce tare mă închizi!/ Tot simt păreții negri cum ne'ngroapă,/ Și'n încăperea umedă, de-o șchioapă/ Târâm o neputință de omizi" (*Din adăpost (în campanie)*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>23</sup> "Renaște iar, și'n zilele aceste/ Când în pământ zac mii de Dumnezei,/ Coboară singur treptele celeste/ Și mori ca om, alături de ei.// Sunt fără cruci și pietre de morminte/ Pe câmpuri largi, pe marginea șoselei,/ Încrucșând un pumn de oseminte/ Cu care-au scris un crez de evanghelii.// Azi nici un Lazăr n-o să mai învie,/ Nici prin miracol orbul nu mai vede/ Iar tina e o simplă murdărie/ Și Toma nici acum nu te crede.// [...] Coboară jos în țărna țării mele/ Unde-am jertfit atom după atom,/ Unde-au căzut atâtea mii de stele...// E mai dumnezeiește să mori om." (*Crist*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>24</sup> See *Idem*, *Cântece de dragoste și moarte* (Bucharest: Cultura Națională, 1935).

<sup>25</sup> "Marie, nu-ți mai căuta băiatu/ Fiul tău a murit pentru noi toți,/ Din mormânt nu poți să-l mai scoți,/ Nici tu, nici altul, că așa e datu.// [...] Osul lui, la fel cu al străinului/ Cum un bob de rouă, seamănă bobului de rouă./ Inima a tăiat-o plugul în două,/ Și o sug în pace buruienile câmpului" (*Târziu de tot*). [t. Ș.P.]

line of men and horses/ Moving in silence, tired from the walk.”, *Red Autumn*<sup>26</sup>) and in his description of the seasons (“It’s spring - the freedom of the being,/ Tomorrow the trees will bloom of peace./ But the cannon drags on its carapace -/ It is not yet the rebirth of men” *Sprout of Spring*<sup>27</sup>), and about life in the trenches (“If our trenches shall by rain be filled/ It will even the rats dead carry./ Nighttime. The biting cold of wind/ It brings the clouds the moon to bury.”, *The Darken*<sup>28</sup>).

If, on the one hand, avant-gardism is an inherent answer to the canon of a bourgeois society that made possible the horrors of the First World War, and, on the other, the names of Romanian avant-gardists are tied more to the French Resistance<sup>29</sup> during the Second World War than to military service during the First, there is one representative of Romanian avant-garde who did serve in 1916, as part of Regiment 3 of heavy artillery in Moldavia, namely **Ion Vinea**. Officially named Ion Iovanaki (Iovanache Ivan Eugen), the coryphaeus of Romanian constructivism is the author of a sort of war poetry similar to that of Adrian Maniu (to whom he is also tied by his roots in symbolism) both by the expressionistic notes of his battlefield pastels (“Autumn, withering lands,/ the grass drowning on the hills,/ the mists robes unfurled roam the shore,/ [...]// Last night the trees/ like dervishes torturing themselves,/ [...] Far away/ the sentries frozen.”, *War (1917)*<sup>30</sup>), and by his ironic revolt against divinity: “The night entombed us/ lanterns blossom on the earth// Vigil betwixt four walls/ I offer to the lonesome daisies/ for the late arrival/ futile./ [...] - Give us, Vanity, the commanded smile/ and your daily bread/ give to us this day.” (*Holy Father*<sup>31</sup>). Lacking the heroism that fuelled the civilians’ perspective of the war, though not the combatants’, Ion Vinea’s sacrilegious perception is a recording of the deceitful monotony of key events in a soldier’s calendar: the moment of deployment (“It was the hour of uncried tears,/ the hour of hollow gazes.” *Deployment Parade (1916)*<sup>32</sup>), the battle (“Body and soul, the brave man with no shield/ he fought, he struggled, and he fell/ his eyes looking up to the stars/ his shoulders in the warm, spilled blood.”, *Clades*<sup>33</sup>), the retreat (“The clock of folktales and solitude/ strikes over snowy peaks and rooftops./ [...] what a merciful and fragile fate/ allowed me this respite?/ Tomorrow the war

<sup>26</sup> “Suntem un șir de oameni și de cai/ Umblând tăcuți și osteniți de mers” (*Toamnă roșie*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>27</sup> “E primăvară – libertatea firii,/ Și mâine pomii vor fi albi ca pacea./ Dar tunul își târăște carapacea –/ Nu-i încă învierea omenirii” (*Primăvară-Muguraș*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>28</sup> “Dacă mai plouă-n șanțul nostru-ntruna,/ Și șobolanii au să se înece./ E noapte. Vântul aspru, rece/ Adună nori ca ă îngroape luna” (*Întunecare*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>29</sup> See Corina Croitoru, “Migration en temps de guerre: poètes roumains d'origine juive dans la France de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale”, *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Europaea* LXI, no. 3 (2016): 145-159.

<sup>30</sup> See Ion Vinea, *Opere*, vol. I – *Poezii*, ed. Elena Zaharia Filipaș (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984).

<sup>31</sup> “Noaptea ne-a zidit/ pe pământ înfloresc lămpile// Veghe între patru pereți/ închin floriei singurătăți/ pentru venirea de mai târziu/ inutilă./ [...] – Fă-ne, Deșertăciune, zâmbetul poruncit/ și pâinea ta cea de toate zilele/ dă-ne-o nouă azi.” (*Tatăl nostru*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>32</sup> “A fost ora neplânselor lacrimi,/ ora privirilor de piatră” (*Parada plecării (1916)*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>33</sup> “Suflet și trup, viteazul fără scut/ s-a războit, s-a smuls și a căzut/ cu ochii la stelele de sus/ și umerii în cald sângele curs” (*Clades*). [t. Ș.P.]



horn bellows again.”, *Retreat* (1917)<sup>34</sup>). Somber and hieratic, the image of the battlefield is realized inside the register of expressionism, while not betraying the playfully iconoclastic spirit of the avant-gardist movement which the poet would later bring to Romanian literature.

The absence of the playful cascades on the theme of war is also featured in the creations of humorists such as **George Topârceanu** or **Păstorel Teodoreanu**. Leaning towards the ironic in his war memoirs with such observations as “war is a fatality: a self-fulfilling one”<sup>35</sup>, Topârceanu, a combatant on the southern front and a participant in the battle of Turtucaia, was extremely reluctant when it came to working his experience as a soldier into his poetry. There are only two texts, excerpts from *Bitter Almonds*,<sup>36</sup> that hint to this biographical episode: *Traditional*<sup>37</sup>, a folkloric poem which tackles the problem of the futile sacrifice of the common man through a simplistic caricature (“Only the dead of the war/ Rotting in the wind and rain/ No one there to ask the poor/ If they are happy or in pain.”), and *Addressless*<sup>38</sup>, a humoristic monologue on the desertion of his residence (“Do you want my address, sir? I’m so sad, I can’t explain.../ How can I give it to you, when I myself/ Have been looking for it, since last summer, everyday!// [...] And as soon as our eyes met/ He told me there, at the train station,/ That if it weren’t for the war/ He would’ve left our dear nation..”). More reserved than Topârceanu, albeit more expansive when it came to the real-life humoristic endeavours, Al. O. Teodoreanu, an artillery officer during the First World War, leaves behind only texts from which his military biography can be pieced together (“I had a rifle on my back,/ To war./ Now I am the machine-gun,/ Heroes bold./ You leave for home again,/ To your fancy,/ I remain, indifferent to it all,/ For I say naught,// I always say naught/ But the naught is just that/Rat-tat.” *The Soldier*<sup>39</sup>) and which oftentimes have consequently ended up being interpreted as parodies on avant-gardists.

There are, of course, many other, lesser known, names that merit their addition to the list of combatant-poets, namely Artur Enăşescu, Constantin Stoika, Vintilă Paraschivescu, Mircea Zorileanu and so forth, whose war poetry has already proven fruitful for an autonomous study,<sup>40</sup> as well as the names of poet-combatants, simple country folks who

<sup>34</sup> “Ceas de basm şi de singurătate/ peste ţigle şi troiene bate./ [...] ce destin milos şi şubred/ mi-a îngăduit popasul?/ Măine goarna iar îşi drege glasul.” (*Retragere* (1917)). [t. Ş.P.]

<sup>35</sup> See George Topârceanu, “Pirin-Planina. Episoduri tragice şi comice din captivitate”, in *Scrieri alese*, ed. Al. Săndulescu (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971), 108.

<sup>36</sup> See George Topârceanu, *Balade vesele şi triste*, ed. Ilie Dan (Bucharest: Albatros, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> “Doar pe morţii din război/ Putreziţi în vânt şi-n ploi/ N-are cine-i întreba/ Dac-a-s fericiţi ori ba” (*Populară*). [t. Ş.P.]

<sup>38</sup> “Îmi ceri adresa, domnul meu? Sunt trist din cale-afară.../ Cum să ţi-o dau, când însumi eu/ O caut de-aastă vară!// [...] Şi cum am dat ochi amândoi/ Mi-a spus acolo-n gară,/ Că dacă nu era război/ Ar fi ieşit din ţară...” (*Fără adresă*). [t. Ş.P.]

<sup>39</sup> See Al. O. Teodoreanu, *Versuri*, ed. Ilie Dan (Bucharest: Minerva, 1972): „Aveam puşcă-n bandulieră,/ La război./ Acum sunt mitralieră, Bravi eroi./ Voi vă duceţi iar pe-acasă,/ După plac,/ Mie de nimic nu-mi pasă,/ Fiindcă tac, Zic mereu că tac,/ Însă nu mai tac,/ Tac-tac.” (*Soldatul*). [t. Ş.P.]

<sup>40</sup> See Corina Croitoru, “Le résidu du résidu : ombres de la poésie roumaine de guerre”, *Caietele Echinox* « *Sujets dépourvus d'importance. Pour une politique du résiduel en littérature* », no. 33 (2017): 202-212.

poured their thoughts on modern conflict into the ancestral folkloric mould, for which the pages of this research are, unfortunately, too few.<sup>41</sup>

### The Prose Writer

Among the Romanian prose writers who have tackled the First World War, namely Mihail Sadoveanu (*Lăpuşneanu Street*, 1921), Liviu Rebreanu (*Forest of the hanged*, 1922), Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu (*Dragon*, 1923), Ion Minulescu (*Red, yellow and blue*, 1924), Cezar Petrescu (*Darkening*, 1928), the only one having made a name for himself as a frontline poet (at first) being **Camil Petrescu** (*The last night of love, the first night of war*, 1930). Voluntarily enrolled in the summer of 1916 and declared dead on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1917 (in reality held prisoner in a concentration camp in Hungary), Camil Petrescu returned to Bucharest in 1918, outraged by the harsh conditions of life after the war, and published the volume of poetry *Idea. Death Circle*<sup>42</sup> in 1923. Arming himself with the very unique conception of poetry being unable to refute reality, which, to him, serves as a threshold, and defending it in his debates with Eugen Lovinescu<sup>43</sup>, Camil Petrescu gives Romanian literature a sort of demystified poetry of war, bereft not only of the consumable clichés of heroism, which had been dismantled by Jean Norton Cru in a study that bore the signature of the Romanian writer too, but also, for the first time, of the traditional language of poetry which was fundamentally incapable of rendering the brutal modernity of the experiences of war. It is valid to say that, for the first time in the history of Romanian literature, the collision of the typical language of poetry and the odd nature of existential events is explored without aesthetic prejudices, which creates a transitive formula of poetry, or an apoetic type of poetics. Thus, at the same time as the replacement of the blitzkrieg with the image of a futile march to nowhere (“We do not know/ Not where we go,/ Nor where we are/ [...] All dry inside, all petrified/ And choked by marching like the flock/ [...] We flow one column, still in silence/ Just like the water of a river in the night.”, *Heavy March*<sup>44</sup>), of the spectacular clashing of forces with the banality of attacks (“Over a shelter, nearby, they dropped a mine ./ That’s all/ And in its wake left perfect silence.”, *Foreverness*<sup>45</sup>) or of the epic bravery of soldiers with the irony of resignation (“Be ready, fellow soldier, Be ready/ Clean up your gun and spade/ And wear that cross around your neck/ Tomorrow the attack is great,/ That’s all./ [...] Oh, once again, plenty of time;/ Don’t be afraid./ This evening they serve tea and crumpets./ Kill your soul early on,/ So you can eat in peace./ (The tea will

<sup>41</sup> See Corina Croitoru, “Combattants-poètes et poètes-combattants dans la Roumanie de la Grande Guerre”, *Romania Orientale* XXVIII (2015): 167-180.

<sup>42</sup> See Camil Petrescu, *Ideia. Ciclul morţii* (Bucharest: Cultura Naţională, 1923).

<sup>43</sup> See Corina Croitoru, “Poésie et prose en première ligne du front : Camil Petrescu, l'intellectuel roumain engagé”, *Transylvanian Review*, nr. 4 (2015): 43-54.

<sup>44</sup> “Nu ştim/ Nici unde mergem,/ Nici unde ne găsim/ [...] Sleşi de sevă, sclerozaţi/ Şi sufocaţi de-atâta mers în turmă/ [...] Ne scurgem în coloană fără şoapte/ Ca apa unui fluviu în noapte” (*Marş greu*). [t. Ş.P.]

<sup>45</sup> “Pe-un adăpost, alături, a căzut o mină./ Atâta tot/ Şi-n urmă linişte-a rămas deplină” (*Vecinicie*). [t. Ş.P.]

help you not to freeze.)” *Verses for a day of attack*<sup>46</sup>), Camil Petrescu’s war poetry repudiates lyricism by way of the prose writer’s genius, proving that the experiences of war can only be captured through an antilyrical equation.

### The Literary Critics and Historians

The Blaise Cendrars of Romanian literature – having wounded his right hand on the southern battlefield but continued to write using his left –, literary critic and historian Dumitru Panaitescu (**Perpessicius**), makes a name for himself as a war poet with publishing his 1926 volume *Shield and Stretcher*.<sup>47</sup> Different from Camil Petrescu’s poetry of notations, extremely modernist in its antilyrical proclivities, the writing of Perpessicius cultivates the classic formulas of poetry, and points to a mythologized imaginary: “From trenches, victims watch with still eyes/ The stars sublime that burn in reaches far,/ And in their cold pupils the starlight/ Reveals reflections from beyond the Styx” (*Victims of the trench*<sup>48</sup>). Highly interesting by virtue of its vetust nature, the poet’s aloof Horatian attitude is able to project the subject’s trauma into an atemporal dimension, through the use of an extraordinary ricochet effect, transforming the most sombre of images into landscapes capable of generating aesthetic emotion: “Shimmering under the Ursa-Minor, the silver pond a sheltering dome/ that nourishes the northern stars, like flowers in a garden home/ Suddenly blossoming under the deluge of shooting hail,/ When over the valleys lingers the night of shadows on patrol// [...] Forlorn, the garden of the northern stars,/ Suddenly blossoming out of the silver pond, itself a nourishment,/ Scatters many wreaths and crowns/ Over flowers, over men, torn asunder by gunfire.” (*Garden of the northern stars*<sup>49</sup>). The total annihilation of trauma by way of affixing it to a *sub specie aeternitatis* myth is, after all, another kind of solution, equally valid as the one proposed by Camil Petrescu, to the existential ineffability of poetry.

Alongside Perpessicius – as well as Tudor Vianu, who takes part in the Moldavian campaign, or Vladimir Stan, the singular case of a 17 year old war veteran (!), whose work in poetry remains unshaken by ripples of the war – it is well worth to mention **Basil Munteanu**, a literary critic and historian who focused on the Moldavian frontline during the Great War.

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<sup>46</sup> “Fii gata, prietene soldat, fii gata/ Curăță-ți cu grijă arma și lopata/ Și pune-ți cruciulița la gât/ Măine va fi un atac mare,/ Și-atât.// [...] O, încă-o dată, ai tot timpul;/ Nu te teme./ Diseară ne vor da ceai și pesmeți./ Omoară-ți sufletul de cu vreme,/ Ca să poți mânca liniștit./ (Ceaiul e bun ca să nu îngheți.)” (*Versuri pentru ziua de atac*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>47</sup> Perpessicius, *Scut și targă: poesii* (Bucharest: Editura Literară a Casei Școalelor, 1926).

<sup>48</sup> “Din șanț, execuții privesc cu ochiul fix/ Spre stelele sublime ce ard în depărtare,/ Și-n recile pupile sticlirile stelare/ Trezesc reflexe stinse de dincolo de Styx” (*Din șanț, execuții...*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>49</sup> “Scânteind sub ursa-mică, ghiolul de argint e-un clopot/ Care-nchide ca-ntr-o seră, flora stelelor polare/ Ce-nfloresc spontane sub al grindinei de gloanțe ropot,/ Când pe văi, durează noaptea umbrelor de apărare// [...] Singură, în tot cuprinsul, flora stelelor polare,/ Înflorind spontan din ghiolul de argint ca dintr-o seră,/ Scutură multiple jerbe și coroane funerare/ Peste flori și peste oameni secerăți de mitralieră” (*Flora stelelor polare*). [t. Ș.P.]

Published in periodicals and rediscovered later in a posthumous edition of critique,<sup>50</sup> his poetry inspired by military campaign tackles not only the themes of eroticism by using the pattern of the neo-Romanticist ("Leaving disgust to pour over,/ I left, and you were lost.../ All my pagan longing gone,/ With my lips the air I kissed." *You have my shoulder*<sup>51</sup>) and the epigonically Eminescu-esque ("A creature in just kisses thinking,/ Her eyes with vivid gestures speaking/ From her dress's many curls/ a nest of dreams unfurls." *Sonet*<sup>52</sup>) but also the themes of patriotism: "How epic blow the bugles, the middle of the night/ Amazed, through fog, you see the stampeding tribes of men/ Whose dark long hair in cadence flows at once..." (*How epic blow the bugles*<sup>53</sup>). The fantastical decor, wherein hyperbolically terrifying battles unravel, becomes a constant of the poetic imaginary of Basil Munteanu, to whom mortuary symbolism can only be developed in the obscurity of nature ("The same old, frozen branches/ On a foggy darkened sky/Reveal their lifeless skeletons/ Of their green and luscious canopy undressed..." *The same old frozen branches*<sup>54</sup>). A fan of the classic genres (sonnets, pastels), the poet rewrites the romantic pastel following the lines of a tanatomorphism ("Playful as no one can be/ With its same majestic flow/ It carries both along the wave/ Its own and our mournful sorrow.../ [...] It sweeps the lifeless enemies/ From our bank and from the other's/ With it along both hats and turbans/ And all at once the skies it gathers." *The Siret*<sup>55</sup>) meant to emphasize, same as before, the incongruence of the marriage between a traditional form of poetry and the distressing experience of modern war.

### Minor Genre or Major Search?

Formulating an appropriate conclusion for the research of a subject as ignored, and yet as controversial as this is, could easily make for the objective of an independent study. As has been outlined by the brief genealogy of Romanian war poetry above, the fundamental idea of this course of action can be summed up in one single question: if not for the attempt of expressing the experiences generated by a seismic historical event, then is Romanian war poetry not worth critical recovery in an effort to question the capacity of the traditional

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<sup>50</sup> See Basil Munteanu, *Ante saeculum. Fantezii panteiste*, ed. Eugen Lozovan, Ruxanda D. Shelden (Cleveland/Copenhagen/Paris: R.D. Shelden Enterprises, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> "Lăsând dezgustul să se verse,/ Plecai, lăsându-te pierdută.../ Tot dorul meu păgân se șterse,/ Iar buza-mi aerul sărută" (*Mă prinzi de gât*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>52</sup> "Făptură ce gânde-a'n săruturi,/ Vorbind cu gesturi vii din ochii-i,/ Din fiecare fald al rochii/ Puteai un cuib de vis să scuturi..." (*Sonet*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>53</sup> "Ce falnic sun în noapte fantastice trompete/ Uimit zărești în ceață năvalnicele cete,/ Ce'n ritm de mers își tremur întunecate plete..." (*Ce falnic sună-n noapte*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>54</sup> "Aceleași creci înfrigurate/ Pe ceru'ntunecat de ceață/ Își sap schelete fără viață/ De verzi podoabe dezbrăcate..." (*Aceleași creci înfrigurate*). [t. Ș.P.]

<sup>55</sup> ("Șăgalnic cum pe lume nu-i/ N'acceași curgere măiastră/ Rostogolește'n valul lui/ Și jalea lui și jalea noastră.../ [...] Culege viețile dușmane/ Și de pe-un mal și de pe altul,/ Ducând cu sine șepci, turbane,/ Și totdeauna tot înaltul" (*Siretul*). [t. Ș.P.]

language of poetry to put modern trauma to words, exploring thus its previous limits and anticipating the metamorphosis to follow?

*Translated from the Romanian by Ștefan Panait*