

BENEVIOLENCE AND FAUX-PORNOGRAPHY IN THE ROMANIAN AVANT-GARDE LITERATURE

ANCA CHIOREAN*

Abstract The present paper aims to analyse some of the more famous and, at the same time, most overlooked manifestations of literary and linguistic violence, at the level of the chosen vocabulary, image depictions or ideas. The goal is to raise the issue of the purpose of violence, which points to the fruitful forms of linguistic violence, and the purpose of the scandals caused by what at that time was interpreted as unnecessarily hypersexualised literature, pornography even, although a more in-depth analysis made through today's critical lenses could show that the label was upheld by mere exaggerated pudicity.

Keywords Violence, Language, Pornography, Sexual Revolution, Literary Manifesto, Romanian Avant-Garde.

The Romanian Avant-Garde literature from the beginning of the 20th century, the “extreme modernism”, as it was labelled, launched in Romania and abroad a series of manifestations that marked the new mentality of the epoch. The manifestoes of the Romanian Avant-Garde mostly follow the structures of the self-referential programmatic texts, but the quality of a “manifesto” can also be applied to the forms that do not necessarily and explicitly follow the “we must” formula. The militancy, the “call to arms” can also occur outside the emphatic theoretical stances shouted through the megaphones of certain titles, such as the *Manifestul activist către tinerime* [The activist manifesto to the young], for instance (containing clear structures, like “Jos arta căci s-a prostituat!” [Down with art, for it has prostituted itself], “VREM” [We want], “DEC” [Ergo]).

Rodica Ilie authored an in-depth analysis of what constitutes an Avant-Garde manifesto and its literary and artistic dimensions, through an overview on the social, historical and political contexts. Thus, she identified the wider definition of the manifesto as a genre – “an artistic doctrine, its legitimization was determined by a certain moment of a critical, negating, combative consciousness, due to which it

* Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. anca_chiorean91@yahoo.com.

DOI: 10.26424/philobib.2020.25.1.05

asserted itself as an act of cultural foundation and justification. The literary manifesto is thus both a legitimizing text, an identity document for certain literary and artistic movements, and an aesthetic formula that allows for the identification of certain literary models, structures, themes and poetic strategies. It thus constitutes itself as a literary genre, especially in the Avant-Garde of the 20th century, since the productivity of the signatories was unequalled in this field.¹ There are indeed many studies that established the purely literary value of the Avant-Garde manifestoes, or that follow their trajectories from programmatic or self-referential texts to literary texts in their own rights. Under the umbrella of programmatism, however, the Avant-Garde manifestoes also followed other directions, different from the ones that call for a new literature – the trajectories of the texts can be traced from polemics, to ‘settling of scores’, to ‘manifestoes’ that mask the fact that their signatories are actually members of a firing squad (aiming at a tendency, a group, certain named or unnamed figures), as is, for instance, the case of *The Dialectic of Dialectics* vs. *The Critique of Misery*.² The two texts have previously been discussed together, contextualized and placed in a relation of causality by Michael Finkental in *Observator Cultural* (among others), although the text of the *Critique of Misery* greatly differs from the one reproduced in the volume edited by Ion Pop: “The personal attacks are excessive and they often surpass the limits of the polemic discourse practiced by the people who, under the pressure of external extreme oppositions, often found themselves on the brink. Perhaps in order to mitigate the impression that could have been made by such a document at that time, the three authors reconsidered the initial contents of the text.”³

A multitude of keywords can be extracted from all that was the Avant-Garde manifesto: revolution, revolt, novelty, utopia, extremism, negation; the lexicon can be explored far and wide and even extended. However, two structures, taken together or separately, can open the direction of the discussion towards areas that have, perhaps, been explored too little: violence / the act of inflicting violence and sexuality / pornography, all of which can be interpreted as forms of anti-taboo.

¹ Rodica Ilie, *Manifestul literar. Poetici ale avangardei în spațiul cultural românesc* [The literary manifesto. Poetics of the Avant-Garde in the Romanian cultural space] (Brașov: Editura Universității Transilvania, 2008), 9.

² See Michael Finkental, “Ce a însemnat pentru suprarealiștii bucureșteni, în anul de grație 1945, «critica mizeriei»?” [What did the year of grace 1945 mean to the surrealists from Bucharest, The Critique of Misery], in *Observator Cultural*, 983 (20), 16-08-2019: <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/ce-a-insemnat-pentru-suprarealistii-bucuresteni-in-anul-de-gratie-1945-critica-mizeriei/> (accessed on 15.01.2020).

³ Ion Pop, *Avangarda românească* [The Romanian Avant-Garde] (Bucharest: Editura Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2015), V-XCIV, in *Ibid.*

Violence and the act of inflicting violence

Besides the already famous militantism, as a form of violence that came into being in the field of concepts such as revolt, change, anger, anti and against, radicality, novelty, negation, the Avant-Garde violence germinates within the fabric of its own writings – all of the definitions given by the exegeses contain an “against itself” component: “The Avant-Garde has experimentalism rooted in its genes, but it is not limited to it. It gives the idea of novelty a very particular meaning – an offensive, aggressive charge that transforms it into a concept filled with gunpowder and ready to squeeze the trigger. The Avant-Garde radicalizes innovation by offering it a self-destructive potential and by turning it onto itself, as it comes close to becoming a norm.”⁴ With respect to the Avant-Garde rhetoric, “in fact, the comedy of the «proclamation to the people» is played out. Aware of the lack of public audience for their ideas, the Avant-Garde representatives do not attempt to make a calm, calculated argument. Their manifestoes are a game of intelligence and fantasy, by throwing poison darts at the reader-spectator, but also to themselves.”⁵ The finality is not on the horizon, since it is diverted towards a constant return to itself: “Between *negation*, as a starting point, and *innovation*, as a finality, there is an entire area of transition, a space and a time of apocalyptic-genesis effervescence, in which the old forms are compromised, overturned, destroyed, and the new ones are in full process of coagulation: this is, in ideal terms, the duration of the Avant-Garde itself. What is striking – beyond the programmatic demands of each movement – is the quasi-absence of the interest for the *work*; what matters most is not the final date of the structuring of the creation, but the movement towards it, the ever lively tension of the spirit, the invested vital energy, the perpetuation of the readiness for creation.”⁶

The trajectory of the violent language in Romanian literature does not begin and does not end with the Avant-Gardists. Although the overview of this form of anti-taboo can be chronologically extended to the literature with “explicit contents” that is very similar to the forms later continued by Geo Bogza and Gherasim Luca, for instance, it may begin with the pamphlet genre: “Tudor Arghezi broke all of the linguistic taboos of the Romanian language. He was probably the most incendiary and the most inventive Romanian ironist, with unthinkable nuances of the language that was squeezed of all its known and unknown contents, enriched with a grotesque fantasy and an exalted absurd (...). We are faced with a prolific creator of Romanian language, with an overflowing verbal frenzy (especially when he is

⁴ Monica Spiridon, Ion Bogdan Lefter, Gheorghe Crăciun, *Experimentul literar românesc postbelic* [The Romanian postwar literary experiment] (Pitești: Editura Paralela 45, 1998), 14.

⁵ Ion Pop, *Avangarda în literatura română* [The Avant-Garde in the Romanian literature] (Bucharest: Editura Atlas, 2000), 435.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

swearing).⁷ Ruxandra Cesereanu emphasizes the strong connection between the literary genre and the verb “to swear” – “In other words, he raises the cusses with aesthetic value to the rank of art, equal in rights with the ode or the euology.⁸”

The violence of language thus represents the common grounds shared by the manifesto and the pamphlet, which also has a violent gene - Magda Răduță, in “*Îi urăsc, mă*” [Man, I hate them] asserts that “In its long history, beginning with the ancient satires and orations, the pamphlet is overwhelmingly a social discourse of confrontation: an issue of actuality, a denunciation of the bad composition of today’s world, a direct, public and outspoken protest. It is born from the indignation for the injustices and it does not back down from anything, risking everything to expose them. A protester speech from its very beginnings, the pamphlet is first and foremost a violent expression of the collective and anonymous voice that is part of the larger history.⁹” Although Magda Răduță’s anthology brings together a series of the great names of the Romanian pamphlet, the text that accompanies Ion Vinea’s pamphlets represents a support in following the evolution of the violent language in Romanian literature: “The primary instrument in achieving the pamphlet effect is, for Vinea, the «artistic cuss». Elevated to an aesthetic level and producing effects of silent admiration, just like any work that has nothing to do with ethics, an insult created expressively seems to be, to him, the highest measure of a lyrical talent. There is a fascination for the difficulty of the craft of «swearing with style» (...). The inter-war pamphlet is meant not only to «spice up» the image, but to construct a new measure for poetics. Consistent with the complete identification with lyricism, Vinea established firm hierarchies and performance criteria: «The cuss is the most difficult of all the literary arts and, in order to use it wisely and to create beauty, we need a completely different individual, with a different blood, a different voice, a different accent, a different inspiration!» (1925)¹⁰” The issue of the purpose thus returns and unveils the primary direction in which the violent language aims to push literature – in order to obtain a “completely different individual”, with a different blood, accent and inspiration, the linguistic (and social?) conventions must be blown up. This need is repetitively, almost obsessively stated in the manifestoes of the Avant-Garde world, the dismantling of the sacred monsters begins not only by rejecting the old values and conventions of the high literature, but also by swearing at them.

⁷ Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Imaginarul violent al românilor* [The Violent Imaginary of Romanians], second edition (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2016), 49.

⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁹ “*Îi urăsc, mă!*” *O antologie a pamfletului. De la cronicarii munteni la Pamfil Șeicaru* [Man, I hate them! An anthology of the pamphlet. From the Wallachian chroniclers to Pamfil Șeicaru], ed. Magda Răduță, pref. Radu Paraschivescu (Bucharest, Humanitas, 2017), 21.

¹⁰ Ibid., 202-203.

Walter Benjamin, in *The Critique of Violence*, distinguishes two forms of violence, namely “law making” and “law preserving” (in relations with the issue of armed conflicts, for instance), but he notes that regarding man, anger leads to the most visible outbursts of violence, that do not relate, as a means, to an intended purpose. It is not a means to an end, it is a manifestation. More precisely, this violence knows completely objective manifestations which can be subjected to criticism. These manifestations occurred in myths – mythical violence, in its archetypal form, is the simple manifestation of the gods. It is not a means for their purposes, but a manifestation of their will and a manifestation of their existence,¹¹ which opens the path towards the possible interpretations of the violent language – a form of inflicting violence on the old literature, vomited by Grummer in the hands of Algazy, an authentic “outburst” of political anger, a manifestation of existence, all of which complete the proclaimed shattering of the mantles.

Pornographic roles

An analysis of the Romanian “scandal” literature (scandalous in many ways, among which is that of the pornographic characteristics) has already been made by Dragoș Silviu Păduraru, who gave examples of scandalous manifestations that occurred before the Avant-Garde literatures, as was the case of Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu’s *Duduca Mamuca*, or even much more famous examples: “The other works, among which was Creangă’s «corrosives» - *Povestea poveștilor* [The tale of tales] and *Povestea lui Ioniță cel prost* [The story of Ioniță the stupid] – were important, but they were never launched into the public arena: these writings only invaded the intimate territory or that of a very small group of «tasters».”¹²

The true explosion of the scandal takes us back to the “porcographer” Tudor Argezei (the term represented one of the detracting gimmicks that were meant to be scathing sanctions for the literary “bad morals”) and to the reactionary eruptions that took place at the time. For example, in *Literatura de scandal* [Scandal literature], N. Georgescu (who, according to the preface written by N. Iorga “took upon himself (...) the difficult task of fighting against the onrushing stupidity that tangles the ideas, stands at the crossroads using atrocity to attract the innocent and to comfort the perversion of the shrivelled souls”¹³) opens the volume through a slogan that is the complete opposite of the one calling for the “deworming of the

¹¹ See Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, *Despre violență* [On violence], transl. by Bogdan Ghiu (Cluj-Napoca: Idea Design & Print, 2004), 19.

¹² Dragoș Silviu Păduraru, *H. Bonciu și literatura de scandal* [H. Bonciu and the scandal literature] (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2016), 38.

¹³ N. Georgescu, *Literatura de scandal* [Scandal literature], pref. by Nicolae Iorga (Bucharest: Editura Ziarului “Universul”, 1938), 3.

brain”, namely that “In anything you write, avoid scurviness!”¹⁴ The furious plea with pretensions of a fine pamphlet is teeming with accusations of “the most libertine of all pornographies” written by “porcographers”, and “a Literary Criticism that is jealous of its supreme prerogatives was satisfied with launching weekly geniuses, with the most prominent and the filthiest at the top: Tudor Arghezi!”¹⁵ N. Georgescu’s volume, although representative for what literary indignation truly means, is however a completely useless one from the viewpoint of its scientific quality, as Dan Gulea also noted: “Except for Arghezi, no other text is discussed in *Literatura de scandal*; this shows that this volume was addressed to a closed public, one that was beforehand convinced of the “pornography” of these writers. For this public, the demonstration is thus superfluous.”¹⁶

The same idea is present in the publication of another moral censor, a member of a highly conservative church, Pr. Ioan N. Ionescu, *Artă și pornografie* [Art and pornography] (Bucharest, Tipografia “Cugetarea”, 1929), which, in its 64 pages of devout rage, contains chapters entitled “The gangrene of pornography” and “The fight against pornography”. The Arghezian ringleader is often present in the discourses of the soldiers of ethics. Ion Sân-Giorgiu analyses the “literary anarchy” and notes that the Romanian magazines published, between 1910 and 1914, the first manifestations of literary exhibitionism in the form of the “pornographic” pamphlet, all apparently led by Tudor Arghezi, “together with an even more turbulent and even less literary comrade, N.D. Cocea. The Romanian writing then went through a revolutionary phase that attacked not the syntax, but the vocabulary. All of the vulgarities, obscenities and filth were embedded in the Romanian journalism. No violence was avoided, no putridity was excluded from the phrases that snapped like whips and no obscenity was spared by these knights of curses obsessed with dirty offences.”¹⁷ However, the admiration for Arghezi appeared in equally memorable forms: Ilarie Voronca, for instance, writes that “Arghezi’s phrase, be it in poem or in prose, gushes virile, flipping the drawers of the mind, slashing the testicles of the critics. (...) Tudor Arghezi: a station that transmits across the centuries a part of the sensibility of the watch. You stop at Arghezi as you would at a rockslide that rips the trees from the ground. Why would you be offended if, in passing, rocks land on your head? Even better.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dan Gulea, *Domni, tovarăși, camarazi. O evoluție a avangardei române* [Gentlemen, companions, comrades. An evolution of the Romanian Avant-Garde] (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2007), 171.

¹⁷ Ion Sân-Giorgiu, “Anarhia literară” [Literary anarchy], in *Realism, pornografie și moralitate în artă* [Realism, pornography and morality in the arts], ed. Mircea Coloșenco (Iași: Timpul, 2008), 317.

¹⁸ Ilarie Voronca, “Tudor Arghezi – Fierar al cuvântului”, in Ion Pop, *Avangarda românească*, 80-81.

Thus, *the vocabulary* is the one that shakes the public's sensibilities to their core. The issue of the vocabulary, particularly that of the violent or pornographic vocabulary, must be placed in relation with the writings of one of the most notorious followers of this linguistic inclination – Geo Bogza, who, at the time, was named “pornography dealer” and was subjected to an entire process of legal consequences: “The pornography dealers were arrested, the pornography dealers were thrown in Văcărești, the pornography dealers were put on trial.”¹⁹ *Poemul invectivă* [The Invective Poem] did indeed cause waves of indignation that erupted based on a superficial understanding of the significance and the purpose of using the “immoral” vocabulary. Compelled to offer explanations, the author stated that a literature whose primary purpose is not to cause delight cannot be considered pornography; the rage and indignation appeared based on the use of a vocabulary that was interpreted exclusively through the basic meaning: “Undoubtedly, *Poemul invectivă* is a violent spectacle. But between that and pornography, there is a difference of substance and of tension similar to that between a lightning and a plate of jam. If pornography means to plain a woman in a lewd position, then *Poemul invectivă* is a woman skinned alive in a dissection room, where there are other corpses of women with their intestines out, with bones shattered to the marrow. *Poemul invectivă* is not pornography, it is not an attempt upon the good morals. It is an attempt upon the spiritual silence and comfort of the world.”²⁰ Similarly, in “Three fragments around an article from the penal code”, Bogza explores “the spheres that exclude one another” – violence and pornography, through the nature of their purposes, become antithetic terms that cannot coexist within the same text. The form and purpose given to sexuality are the ones that establish the tone of a text, and if the function of delight is completely absent, an accusation of pornography becomes completely illogical – “The issue of sexuality was always different at *unu* and in my most «immoral» poems, for which no one could ever contest their painful breath, a rhythm of suffering that absolves them not only from the penalties of article 262, but also from the sneers of human stupidity. The violence of expression implies a violence of suffering which, from the very beginning, excluded the presence of any pornographic elements, since pornography, in its essence, implies satisfaction. Therefore, where there is suffering, there can be no pornography. There could be sadism or masochism (...) but not pornography.”²¹

We can thus note that the use of a vocabulary that seems to belong to a pornographic language does not create pornography. The purpose of the vocabulary migrates towards a form of authentic expression and even towards a form of

¹⁹ Geo Bogza, “Însemnări pentru un fals tratat de pornografie” [Notes on a fake treaty on pornography], in *Realism, pornografie și moralitate în artă...*, 349.

²⁰ Ibid., 353-354.

²¹ Geo Bogza, “Treie fragmente în jurul unui articol din codul penal” [Three fragments around an article from the penal code], in Ion Pop, *Avangarda românească...*, 224-225.

unmasking imposture. In *Vocabular, divagații și precizări* [Vocabulary, divagations and clarifications], Bogza challenges a form of social pudicity that, in the end, leads to blatant literary imposture. The literary quality must thus be questioned in the case in which the primary criterion is that of a semantic “cleanliness”: “It was quite common to give the word a significance of *clean*, not in the absolute sense, namely that of the total absence of foreign intervention, but in the sense of *cleanliness* from a hygienic viewpoint. Of a double hygiene, both physical and moral. In order to support this idea, I must cite the stupefaction of an individual in front of whom I had exclaimed: pure shit – no, shit cannot be pure, because it is dirty, he said, as he became alarmed – or the criteria supported by a magazine director regarding a horrifyingly bad poem about which he said it was pure, simply because the poem spoke of angels.”²²

The option of using an “impure” vocabulary (not vulgar, surely?) can somewhat be explained not theoretically, but militantly, in *Poezia pe care vrem să o facem* [The poetry that we want to make], a manifesto signed by Geo Bogza, Paul Păun, Gherasim Luca and S. Perahim: “After the war, a poetry of contempt for the realities of life and for everything happening on earth was written and it was consistent with that time of collective neurosis, of a scalding and often psychopathic thirst for life, but now an abstract and intellectualist poetry is being written, which has nothing to do with ordinary life and especially with the life of today (...) The poetry of dreams, the pure poetry, the hermetic poetry have been over for a long time.”²³

However, from a theoretical standpoint, illustrated through Bogza’s unclean language, Gherasim Luca was the one to make the even more violent leap towards reflecting certain (even political) stances. The sexual revolution is announced in *The Dialectic of Dialectics* almost as vernacular manifestation of freudo-marxism: “We accept, but we surpass, at least on a theoretical level, all known states of love: debauchery, the unique love, the complex love, the psychopathology of love. In an attempt to capture love in all its most violent and decisive forms, in all its most attractive and impossible forms, we are no longer content with seeing it as the great disruptor that sometimes manages to crush, here and there, the division of society into classes. The destructive force of love towards any established order also contains and surpasses the revolutionary needs of our time; (...) the limitless erotization of the proletariat represents the most precious guarantee we could find in order to ensure a true revolutionary development.”²⁴ However, the true sexual revolution (an early and unfinished one, as we shall see)

²² Geo Bogza, “În vocabular, divagații și precizări” [In the vocabulary, divagations and clarifications], in *Ibid.*, 231.

²³ Geo Bogza, Paul Păun, Gherasim Luca, S. Perahim, “Poezia pe care vrem să o facem” [The poetry that we want to make], in *Ibid.*, 245, 247.

²⁴ Gherasim Luca, Trost, “Dialectica dialecticii” [The dialectic of dialectics], in *Ibid.*, 282-283.

took place within the pages of the magazines *Muci* [Snot] and *Pulă* [Dick], which most critics consider to be mere infantile mischiefs.

The shift, or even the evolution from Geo Bogza to Gherasim Luca is noted by the critics at the level of their language, which was pushed one step forward in its freedom of expression: "If, in the poems of young Bogza, the «heavy» words were still designated by their scientific or periphrastic terms (sex, faeces, vagina, testicles, urinating – with the exception of the more layman's terms tits and snot), for the teenager Gherasim Luca, the layman's terms penetrate (if we could say so) a printed Romanian poem for the first time", followed by a fragment from *Pe munte cu popi și cu curve* [On the mountain with priests and hookers] "containing jerky psycho-scatological invocation that push the delirium to paroxysm."²⁵ Thus, Paul Cernat discusses the magazines that, throughout the years, were the ones approached most unjustly – "The shift in the poetic voice was made by hypersexualising the language, in the sense of a «transgressive» violation of the interdiction theorised by Georges Bataille in *L'Erotisme*. The delirious-obscene *Pe munte cu popi și cu curve* [On the mountain with priests and hookers] from the magazine *Pulă* [Dick], or the much more organised, in the form of a fair advertisement, *Cuvânt de deschidere la o expoziție de pictură* [Opening speech for a painting exhibition] published in *unu*, no.44, 1931, and *Se caută potcoave de inimă moartă* [Looking for horseshoes for a dead heart] published in *Muci* [Snot], stand out through the psychedelic frenzy of the exhibitionist and histrionic discourse. In these poems, the sexual aggression is aimed both at the prestige of Art and at the prestige of Family or at the canonical Religion."²⁶

Voilà le (autre) phallus!

The magazine *Pulă*²⁷ [Dick] can be considered to be the climax (!) of the Avant-Garde manifestations of that time and it represents a fruitful field for an entire series of possible interpretations. In 1931, teenagers Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, S. Perahim and Aureliu Baranga published one of the most controversial magazines of the Romanian literature. Based on the unlimited courage of youth, they did not stop at merely giving the magazine a scandalous title, but they included the already famous nude photograph of the editors "at work" and an insertion in the title page: "au scos

²⁵ Paul Cernat, *Vase comunicante. (Inter)fete ale avangardei românești interbelice* [Communicating vessels. (Inter)faces of the Romanian interwar Avant-Garde literature] (Iași: Polirom, 2018), 208.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

²⁷ The original issues are almost impossible to find. For a reproduction of the magazine *Pulă*, see *Caielele Ion Vinei – Aldebaran*, 2-4 (1996), special issue Vinei-Tzara, 60-61; For a reproduction of the magazine *Muci*, see *Caielele Ion Vinei – Aldebaran*, 2-4 (1996), special issue Claude Sernet, 116-119.

treisprezece pule” [they published thirteen dicks]. However, besides its clear intention of provocation, the magazine represented four pages of an even clearer anti-bourgeoisie stance. Aureliu Baranga would later confirm this political side of the youthful upheaval – in 1966, he received a questionnaire from a literary weekly magazine that also contained the question “why do you write?”, which led to “what we have become used to name, with an exhausted expression: «writer’s conscience»”²⁸, which was apparently awoken in the 30s, at the time of his collaboration with the magazines under scrutiny: “I began in 1930, as an Avant-Garde poet. Back then, when I was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, I knew very little about the world or about life. (...) I did not know a great deal about the world and about life, but of one thing I am certain: I was young, exasperated and scorched by rage, I hated, with all my being, the bourgeoisie state, the bourgeoisie love, and I knew that my hatred was not simulated. At that time, the terms «conscience» and «writer» were part of the world I wished to see aflame; for a long time, these notions, to me, were burdened by derisory contents.”²⁹ In the case of Paul Păun as well, the moment the magazine *Pulă* was launched was decisive in his later artistic formation, a connection that was also made by Dan Gulea, discussing the aspects related to the violence of language – “An anticipation of this destiny was made with his participation, in 1931, to the [*Pulă*]³⁰ magazine (...). Profound, psychoanalytical causes determined Paul Păun to adopt a symbolical stance towards reality, first and foremost through language; a first stage is that of the violence of language, a classical method of transgression. His debut volume, *Plămânul sălbatec* [The wild lung] (1939) contains no explicit violence of language (...), but the most diverse couplings and decorporalisations are suggested (...). The poem that compiles the volume thus becomes an immense, cannibalistic cry, a disinheritance, an annulment of language, an eternal revolt of any poet from any world and meridian, the revolt of language.”³¹

The events that accompanied the magazine’s destiny are already famous and they are part of a literary folklore that may have different degrees of historical truth, but which, in the absence of a clear documentation (we can prove aspects such as the publication of the magazine, the authors’ incarceration, but not the affects it created) remain part of the field of speculation. Regarding the alleged rage of Nicolae Iorga (the young authors sent him an issue with the inscription “Tu ai? N-ai!” [Do you have one? No, you don’t!]), Nicolae Tzone states, in the magazine that reproduced the scandalous issue: “The Professor’s anger had to be diminished and the rebel children had to be immediately taken to prison, namely to Văcărești. And

²⁸ Aureliu Baranga, *Jurnal de atelier* [Shop journal] (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1978), 112.

²⁹ Ibid., 112-113.

³⁰ A.N. The author does not directly name the magazine...

³¹ Dan Gulea, *Marginaliile avangardelor* [The Avant-Guard marginals] (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2016), 256-257.

they were indeed taken in a jiffy. It would appear that Mr. Iorga had not been amused, had he even ever read it, by the *Povestea poveștilor* [The tale of tales], also known as *Povestea pulei* [The tale of the cock], written by Creangă. Moreover, he was a sworn enemy of the Avant-Garde. It is thus not hard to believe that he interpreted the gesture of the «snotty» novices not only as an unforgivable personal offence, but also a severe, enormous threat to society.³²

Considering the wave of reactions and repercussions for the publication of the magazine, perhaps another form of artistic expression can be part of the discussion, through “radical juxtaposition”, namely the *happening*. Susan Sontag, in *Against Interpretation*, notes that the most striking characteristic of a happening is the way in which it treats the public. The event is created in such a way that it irritates and insults the audience. The participants can throw water, coins or dust at the audience and there is no desire to meet the audience’s expectations³³. Inevitably, the “radical juxtaposition” characteristic to the *happening* leads the discussion towards surrealism, and the art understood thusly is more obviously instilled by an aggression against conventionality³⁴. The purposes of the radical juxtaposition and of the editors of the controversial magazine seem to coincide: according to Susan Sontag, the art of radical juxtaposition can serve different purposes; a great part of what constitutes surrealism served the purposes of irony – be it the joke made at the expense of what is stupid, juvenile, extravagant, obsessive, or the social satire.³⁵

The actuality of the magazine allows for its approach from the direction of the happening, but it can continue towards the areas of the performance or body art (considering the fact that one page included a nude photograph of the editors). Igor Mocanu, in a text published in the online magazine *Art Dance News* in 2012 stated that “the magazine contained the first example of body art & performance, and the photograph entitled «The editors-in-chief of the *Pula* magazine at work», depicting two male nudes, is transformed into an archival support of this corporal anti-bourgeoisie performance. Dan Gulea, in his volume *Domni, tovarăși, camarazi. O evoluție a avangardei române* [Gentlemen, companions, comrades. An evolution of the Romanian Avant-Garde] (2007) goes one step further and states that this could be the starting point of an unfinished sexual revolution. What is certain is that the history of the Romanian performance is still to be written or at least revised.³⁶

³² Nicolae Tzone, “Raritate bibliofilă din arhiva Sașa Pană” [A bibliographical rarity from the Sașa Pană archive], in *Caietele Ion Vinea – Aldebaran*, 2-4 (1996), special issue Vinea-Tzara, 60.

³³ See Susan Sontag, *Împotriva interpretării* [Against interpretation], transl. by Mircea Ivănescu (Bucharest: Vellant, 2016), 305.

³⁴ See *Ibid.*, 310.

³⁵ See *Ibid.*, 311.

³⁶ Igor Mocanu, “Revistă de pulă modernă. Organ universal” [A magazine of modern dick. Universal organ], in *Art Dance News*, November 2012:

The aforementioned (incontestable) actuality is supported by the effects that the manifesto-magazine still produces – the indignation seems to be a reaction that transcends the epochs: “Incidentally, this publication recently triggered a press scandal. At a documentary exhibition on the Romanian historical Avant-Garde (*The Other Side of the Romanian Avant-garde: Film, Photography, Performance*, curator: Igor Mocanu), in April 2015, at the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York, the Avant-Garde magazine *Pulă* from 1 October 1931 was also exhibited. Grid Modorcea in New York, Mircea Diaconu and Mihai Gâdea in Bucharest (Antena 3 TV station, at the *Sinteza zilei* programme from 7 May 2015) and several online publications criticised the exhibition with proletarian rage. Such situations occurred at even higher levels. *Voilà le phallus!*, exclaimed Pablo Picasso in 1920 at the sight of the sculpture *Princess X*, by Constantin Brâncuși, at the Independent Salon in Paris³⁷, which led to the sculpture being withdrawn from the exhibition.

Discussing the possibility of a sexual revolution implied by the magazine under scrutiny, Andrei Oișteanu returns to the 1945 manifesto signed by Luca and Trost, in which they “urged the proletariat towards a social and aesthetic revolution, as well as an unavoidable sexual revolution (...). But the sexual revolution promoted by Andre Breton referred to the «free discussion» of different erotic experiments «including the perversions» (with, let’s say, Freud as a mentor), and not to their free practice (with, let’s say, de Sade as a mentor).³⁸”

The issue of language under the prudish “pseudo-ethical” censorship appears by readdressing the magazine from 1931 in connection with the modern dictionaries, compiled by the tied hands of the 21st century: “The terms that name the sexual practices and the genitals do not appear in the modern or contemporary Romanian dictionaries, or they are replaced by different euphemisms. (...) Even in the much-elaborated *Romanian Language Dictionary* (...) the absence of the term *pulă* [dick] is falsely counterbalanced by the presence of the term *puță* [peepee], a noun defined as «(pop.) penis (of children)». The castration of the dictionaries was thus doubled by their infantilization.³⁹” The issue of the Romanian taboo seems to be the primary basis for the reactions and it represents exactly what such a manifesto-magazine desires to blow up. Although there was a true possibility to trigger the much-desired sexual revolution that could have “dewormed the brain”, the explosion (and all its purposes) was crushed by *savoir-vivre*. Mihaela Ursa, in *Eroticon*, states that “the late development of our literary expression, in the rhythm of the East-European literatures, but not in that of the Western literatures, implies a

<https://igormocanu.wordpress.com/2012/11/03/revista-de-pula-moderna-organ-universal/> (accessed in January 2020).

³⁷ Andrei Oișteanu, *Sexualitate și societate. Istorie, religie și literatură* [Sexuality and society. History, religion and literature], second edition (Iași: Polirom, 2018), 644.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 646.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

much slower and much shyer ravelling of the expressions of amorous fiction. For instance, the Romanian literature had its sexual revolution, thematically and linguistically speaking, only in the 2000s, so deeply rooted is its terminological pudicity and, equally, so shy were its fictions of the body. An analysis of the Romanian literature would have thus required a different toolbox and a different level of explanatory permissiveness.⁴⁰

However, there has been a considerable change in perception, one that took place gradually, slowly, but that today allows for a reassessment of such “problematic” texts. The tempering of the supposedly moral standards led to the fact that “as opposed to the inter-war readers, today we know that the language of eroticism is visibly very far from that of pornography and, as such, there is a prominent line that divides the two notions. (...) We are well aware that the inter-war readers’ «pornography» does not correspond with the «pornography» of today.”⁴¹ If one of the purposes of “pornography” is to delight (a goal somewhat achieved, considering the fact that the magazine was distributed in a closed circle), the political dimension is the one that confers this manifestation the quality of a manifesto, almost in the spirit of the self-proclaimed manifestoes. The language, in this case, plays the role of the code-breaker, which is essentially a revolutionary act – “As previously shown, to be scandalous means to refuse the norm, the dogma, the authority, to be *subversive*. This rupture tendency is – as we know – even older (...). The rupture can actually be interpreted as a mark of originality. It is the mark of a writer who sets out for a «revolution» in the field of the arts, seeking that innovative fact in relation with tradition.”⁴²

If, in the absence of the “amorous fiction”, the sexuality of language (and of the image, in this case) is only aesthetic reason, surpassing labels such as “youthful mischiefs”, such manifestations take the shapes of manifestoes in their own rights. The leap from “Down with art, for it has prostituted itself” to “On the mountain with priests and hookers” was almost predictable and almost natural.

Snotty guilt and ha-ha-ha

One year later, on the occasion of Perahim’s exhibition, “O nouă trăснаie a grupului *Alge*” [A new mischief of the *Alge* group] is published, namely the magazine *Muci* [Snot] (with a self-deprecating subtitle that continues to attack “the bourgeoisie good morals”: “Pentru că nu purtăm fuduliile în tabacheră, ne intitulăm GRUPUL MUCOȘILOR” [Since we do not carry our balls in a snuffbox, we call ourselves the

⁴⁰ Mihaela Ursa, *Eroticon. Tratat despre ficțiunea amoroasă* [Eroticon. Treaty about amorous fiction] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2012), 202-203.

⁴¹ Dragoș Silviu Păduraru, 65.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73-74.

snotty group]; 200 issues were printed and circulated, as opposed to the 13 issues of the previous “mischief”. The exhibition is announced at the end, in a footnote: “Sometime during the following month, our friend S. Perahim will host his painting and drawing exhibition, in the waiting room of madam Frosa, from *Crucea de Piatră* [The stone cross] (...). We must announce right now that we will not be responsible for any attacks, because we feel *cu mucii pe căciulă*”⁴³. In the spirit of the sexual revolution proposed by the two magazines, it is unsurprising that the exhibition is announced to be taking place at the Stone Cross, a neighbourhood known at the time as the area of the brothels in Bucharest. Earlier, in 1928, Geo Bogza had published in the magazine *Urmuz* a text entitled *Elogiul bordelului*⁴⁴ [A praise for the brothel], in which he wrote: “Prostitution // The word is vermicular and it is uttered by lips covered in mud and slobber”, but: “prostitution, the most odious prostitution, is not practiced as one would believe: in dark places, by wretched women; it is practiced in full light of day, in the cover stories of the newspapers, in the messages from the sovereigns, in the graceful salutes and in the babbles of innocent young girls”, which would suggest that the famous Stone Cross would indeed be the perfect location for the exhibition of young Perahim.

Besides the authors of the previous magazine, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, S. Perahim and Aureliu Baraga, the “snotty group” was this time completed by Sesto Pals, Fredy Goldstein and Mielu Mizis. The latter two were apparently children with mental disabilities (Fredy Goldstein, for instance, was six years old). Gherasim Luca’s fascination for the “genius” Goldstein was also noted by Michael Finkenthal, in a text published in *Observator Cultural*, entitled *Fredy Goldstein sau despre vulgaritatea inocentă* [Fredy Goldstein, or notes on innocent vulgarity]: “According to Gherasim Luca, at six years old, children only knew how to count to ten. Surely, they did not yet have the ability of understanding abstract concepts, such as «vulgar» or «absurd», and their logic is often deficient. Therefore, in principle, they have the potential of becoming authors of ... automatic writings.”⁴⁵ Automatic writing is indeed an option, but we must ask ourselves if an approach from the direction of Art Brut were not equally justified. I shall reproduce here a text published in *Alge* (6 July 1931), under a drawing made by Mielu Mizis: “MIELU MIZIS! MIELU MIZIS! Your drawings are the drawings that say nothing and that is why when I look at them, I walk for hours on the most winding streets, trying to solve the enigma that your

⁴³ Play on words: the original Romanian saying, “cu musca pe căciulă” literally translates to “with a fly on one’s cap” and it refers to feeling guilty. The authors replaced the fly with snot and used the saying in the form of “with snot on one’s cap”.

⁴⁴ Geo Bogza, “Elogiul bordelului”, in *Urmuz*, 5, June-July 1928.

⁴⁵ Michael Finkenthal, “Fredy Goldstein sau despre vulgaritatea inocentă” [Fredy Goldstein, or notes on innocent vulgarity], in *Observator Cultural*, 743 (2014): <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/intersectii-fredy-goldstein-sau-despre-vulgaritatea-inocenta-i/> (accessed in January 2020).

sweet and poisonous line leaves in my blood. Mielu Mizis! Your drawings made with the chemical pencil that you put in your mouth over and over again broke my heart, Mielu Mizis. Your drawings, you scatter-brained child, who walks to school each morning through numerous beatings, are perhaps the stupidest drawings and maybe that is why they are the most brilliant. I know very well, Mielu Mizis, that by standing alongside us, you will be just as stained as we stain your younger friend, Fredy Goldstein; but today you mean everything to me (...). But all of this, Mielu Mizis, means nothing, because you are still the most brilliant and the youngest of all the painters and poets.⁴⁶ Future studies should, perhaps, investigate the involuntary infantile vulgarity within the Avant-Garde manifestations from the direction of the Art Brut.

In the case of the magazine *Muci* [Snot], the consequences were similar to the previous magazine and they perfectly reflected the mentality of that time: “through the direct and extremely harsh intervention of Nicolae Iorga, a raid with great fuss was carried out, which led to the incarceration of the “snotty group”. The group wound up in the mouldy and bedbug-infested Jilava. After ten infernal days, the parents and the relatives managed, through multiple interventions, to liberate the accused and the trial was to be held with them at large. Eventually, the episode ended with no other drastic repercussions.⁴⁷”

We must once again raise the issue of the purpose of the “vulgarity” that was present, this time in a much smaller proportion, but it was replaced by more ironic and self-deprecating tendencies; the violent factor, however, continues to appear – Sesto Pals, in *Intrarea cu câini în restaurant strict oprită* [Dogs in the restaurant are strictly prohibited] wrote “Would you not laugh with me? Here is one that has drowned in your blood. Will you not eat him with me? Some cutlery for you, some cutlery for me... Blood is the best sauce. We will eat blood with spoons and we will suck the brains through ebony straws”, and the conclusions inclines towards an equally tense relaxation (!): “Nature constructed palaces of ha-ha-ha. It screamed its good song. The train sent a postal worker and the postal worker sent his helpers who jumped bodyless, so that they would be lighter, and they pulverised themselves so that they would be many, only with their feet screaming ha-ha-ha. I received an envelope in the mail. I opened it: Ha! Ha! Ha!⁴⁸” Moreover, we must not lose sight of the magazine’s fruitful actuality – it is open to an interpretation in the form of a reenactment: “the magazine *Muci* [Snot] undertakes something else, artistically speaking. It constitutes itself as a pre-contemporary reenactment. But what were the Avant-Guardists of the “snotty group” reenacting? The answers given so far are

⁴⁶ Issue fully accessible in the CUL Cluj Digital Library:

http://dspace.bcuculuj.ro/jspui/bitstream/123456789/21957/1/BCUCLUJ_FP_452944_1931_006.pdf

⁴⁷ Nicolae Tzone, in *Caietele Ion Vinea – Aldebaran*, 2-4 (1996), special issue Claude Sernet, 116.

⁴⁸ See *Caietele Ion Vinea – Aldebaran*, nr. 2-4 (1996)..., 116.

numerous. The disinhibition of the arts was the one given by the majority of the historians of the Avant-Garde, the sexual revolution (Dan Gulea). From the viewpoint of the history of the performance, however, the magazine *Muci* [Snot] and the context generated by its publication represents one of the founding moments of an art that would only appear two decades later.⁴⁹

The concepts of violence, infliction of violence and these explosive, aesthetic and political beginnings of a sexual revolution represent fields that have not yet been sufficiently explored by the scholarly literature. Such approaches could outline an aesthetics of violence in all its forms, even in the forms in which the only elements truly subjected to violence are the (literary, social, moral or conduct) norms. The actuality of this issue is also supported by more recent critical writings, as are the approaches carried out by Andrei Oișteanu or Ruxandra Cesereanu, or even the New York exhibition, liberations from a completely counterproductive academic purism, or attempts of unwinding some of the “moral” rigors imposed to the ways in which literature should be read, through editorial capers as were the ones published by *Scena 9*⁵⁰. The post-communist journalism has, in fact, given us other attempts of revitalising the use of violent language, which could also be interpreted as stances taken in relation with the forms and purposes of discourse; however, in spite of their fame and even popularity, they represent a failure in the application of the inter-war pamphlet model – regarding the *Academia Cațavencu*, or their “histrionic cousins” *Plai cu boi*, Ruxandra Cesereanu considers that they “desired to legitimise their own linguistically violent imaginary, by drawing inspiration from the Argezian one, but since their goal was slanderous and the cuss was gratuitous, the result was merely an unshapely and altered mimicry of the Argezian swearing.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Igor Mocanu, “Pentru că nu purtăm fuduliile în tabacheră ne intitulăm grupul mucoșilor” [Since we do not carry our balls in a snuffbox, we call ourselves the snotty group], in *Art Dance News*, April 2013: <https://igormocanu.wordpress.com/2013/05/08/pentru-ca-nu-purtam-fuduliile-in-tabachera-ne-intulam-grupul-mucosilor/> (accessed in December 2019).

⁵⁰ See “Scene erotice din literatura română. De la Creangă, în zilele noastre (NSFW)” [Erotic scenes in the Romanian literature. From Creangă to today (NSFW)], by Andra Matzal, Cosmin Postolache, illustrations by Sorina Vazelina, in *Scena 9*, 22 July 2016:

<https://www.scena9.ro/article/audio-sex-literatura-romana>; “9 poziții sexuale din literatura română” [9 sexual position in the Romanian literature], by Mihai Iovănel, illustrations by Sorina Vazelina, in *Scena 9*, 14 February 2019: <https://www.scena9.ro/article/pozitii-sexuale-literatura-romana>; “Bideul, instrumentul primei revoluții sexuale” [The bidet, the instrument of the first sexual revolution], in *Scena 9*, 26 February 2019:

<https://www.scena9.ro/article/bideu-revolutie-sexuala-psihanaliza>.

⁵¹ Ruxandra Cesereanu, 49-50.

The violent manifestations of the Avant-Garde literature drew the firing lines on the testing grounds of the limits of language, as they had been questioned in the manifestoes, limits that must still be tested with new instruments.