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## ***IDEAS AND SENTIMENTS OF THE TIME: THEORIZING THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ROMANIAN LITERATURE***

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**Abstract:** *This essay proposes a critical examination of representative Romanian novels of the twentieth century and their intersection with the theoretical crosscurrents of the century's fiction. The unusual range of writers and texts selected, from Gellu Naum, Mihail Sadoveanu and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu to Camil Petrescu and Ștefan Agopian, attest to the importance of and necessity for a critical vision of the Romanian novel and a commitment to uncovering its dynamic interactions that include elements of magic, the presence of detailed descriptions of the phenomenal world, and an unusual interaction between the reader and the text that disrupts our received ideas about time, space, and identity.*

Recovering Western tradition and simultaneously challenging realism as a dominant narrative mode the Romanian novel of the twentieth-century relies on archaic myth and modernity to convey the shifting and subtle identities and continuities of literary tradition. Attesting to the importance of and necessity for a critical vision of the Romanian novel and a commitment to uncovering its dynamic interactions, the century's representative fiction opens up unfamiliar aesthetic and cultural landscapes also steeped in the magic of folklore. Precisely because of its inexhaustible expressions, the Romanian novel of the twentieth century allows for an indefinite number of interpretations, each of which may illuminate, yet none of which exhausts, the meaning of the text. En fin de compte, while revealing an unusual range of writers and texts, critical examinations reflect a need for perpetual interpretations, any of which may be competent or correct, but none of which can be final.

Overcoming the lasting, tenuous grip of Realism, Romanian novelists of the twentieth century interrupted narrative conventions to offer in their fiction a re-positioning of language, a potent iconography, and a nationalist mythopoetic universe *vis-à-vis* modernity. As common ground of artists and novelists in the twentieth century, Romania provided a peculiar space to all fiction; a space that, when exported, gave definition to a good part of the twentieth century itself. The Romanian-born Tristan Tzara, the founder of the Dada movement, spoke indirectly about that particular milieu through his made up name – which means “sad in the country” – and about the specific longing of the artist's psyche.<sup>1</sup> It was a longing that gave birth to some of the twentieth-century's most influential Avant-garde experimentalism (Avant-gardism) and, as Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties* suggests, changed the way modern Europe thinks, looks, and dreams.<sup>2</sup>

Torn between taking for granted that an artist is a seer, a *voyant* in Rimbaud's words, and entertaining at the same time a vast sense of futility, artists of the Romanian Avant-gardism sought to free language from its conventions.<sup>3</sup> It achieved this goal by demolishing, in aggressive shockwaves of

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<sup>1</sup> Tzara's name was Samuel Rosenstock, but his pen name (“tzara,” which means *motherland* in Romanian, and “Tristan,” which means *sad*) was meant to connect him to a defining identity.

<sup>2</sup> Stoppard's play, which features James Joyce, Vladimir Ilych Lenin, and Tristan Tzara as quintessential figures of the twentieth century, uses humorous allusions and adapted quotes from Tzara's “Lampisteries précédée des sept manifestes dada” (Paris:1963) and from Tzara's collected observations, suggestively titled *The Power of Images*.

<sup>3</sup> In the decades preceding and following WWI, the provincial inventions of a coterie of young Romanian Avant-gardists such as Tristan Tzara, Marcel Iancu, Stephan Roll (born Gheorghe Dinu), Ilarie Voronca (born Eduard Marcus),

experimental disruption, the supremacy of language, and by deferring playfully to their own intellectual and mystical qualities rooted in the vast, imaginary playing field of Levant – an approximate area of the Balkans, circumscribed by the Black Sea and consisting largely of Romania and parts of Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey – a peculiarly European-oriental region whose Byzantine attitude (unconventional sexuality coupled with a decadent *joie de vivre* in the face of adversity) and aesthetic impulses echoed throughout twentieth-century Romanian fiction.

Simultaneously, the Romanian fiction of the twentieth century was open to and receptive of Western influences that created conditions for the emergence of a robust Romanian Modernism. Promoted primarily by the critic and novelist Eugen Lovinescu through his influential magazine and literary cenacle *Sburătorul* (Winged Spirit; 1919-1927), the systematic adaptation of Western models in order to align Romanian literature and culture with its European counterparts was formulated in his “synchronism” theory. While opposing the “extremist trends” of the Avant-garde, Lovinescu’s theory encouraged the synchronization of Romanian culture with its urban counterparts in Western Europe without discounting a need for cultural specificity, namely a national originality that would manifest itself naturally in the resulting fictional works. In his seminal histories of modern Romanian civilization and literature, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane* (*History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*) and *Istoria literaturii române contemporane, 1900-1937* (*History of Contemporary Romanian Literature, 1900-1937*, 1937), Lovinescu opposed the previous century’s sentimental lyricism and romanticized rural fiction and promoted instead exploration and innovation in literature, as well as an emphasis on the urban environment and the probing of consciousness.

Exposed to both the literary excesses of the Avant-garde and the intellectual exchanges with the urban cultures of the West, Romanian novelists of the twentieth century were also devoted to the genius of genuine folk art. All of them drew their inspiration from the magic of the Romanian folklore that came to Romanian peasants nearly uninterrupted from Greece, and Byzantium, almost unbroken from Orpheus who was born in Thrace, and that transformed its metaphors, motifs, and archetypes. Such alchemical operations produced unique blends of folkloric realism and Gothic fantasy, an integration of formative Romanian myths and mythic folk types within Western canons of Modernism; and a continuous exchange between Western fictional models and Romanian folklore’s genres, oral creations and forms (from the songs of longing known as *doine*, to ballads, legends, tales, and rituals).

The fictional configurations of the works selected in this summary examination reflect the subtle transformations and interplay of all these cultural models, from the experimental trends of the Romanian Avant-garde, through the creative imitations and exploration of Modernist tradition to the reliance on an indigenous rural or folk tradition. As national narratives that both absorb the literary value of oral creations and rely simultaneously on Modernist self-conscious aesthetic creations and established models of grand narratives, these selected works also conform to a national literary tradition that George Călinescu, one of the most respected twentieth-century critics, sought to establish in his *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (*History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*, 1940). Finally, the

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and Victor Brauner in Bucharest appeared in short-lived but significant journals where their artistic frondistes’ absurd poems gleefully absorbed their touchingly insane drawings. The list of publications includes: *75HP* whose single, 1924 issue, under the directorship of Ilarie Voronca and Victor Brauner, advocated the concept of pictopoetry; *Integral*, which started its publication in Bucharest under M.H. Maxy in 1925 and later added another publishing office in Paris appearing under Benjamin Fondane and Hans Mattis-Teutsch until 1928; *Unu*, led by Sașa Pană and including in its 1928-1932 issues contributions not only from prominent Romanian Avant-gardists, but also poems of contributors like Louis Aragon, André Breton, René Crevel, and Paul Éluard, and rich art work illustrations from Marc Chagall and Man Ray, among many others; and *Contimporanul*, which started its publication in 1922 under the supervision of Ion Vinea and was in subsequent years responsible for organizing four surrealist exhibitions that hosted both Romanian and foreign surrealists.

dynamics of trans-individual elements of these works—namely their types of discourses, images, themes, cultural clichés and other conventions that are ancillary to individual fictional creations, recommend the novels discussed in this volume as miniature canonical units that meet the “critical” norms the influential Romanian critic Nicolae Manolescu has established in his *Critical History of Romanian Literature* (1990).

Like his close friend and collaborator, the painter Victor Brauner who illustrated two of Naum’s volumes of poetry, Gellu Naum absorbed Avant-garde experimentalism and turned it into an idiom for a private journey of initiation into a self-state, and for freeing what lay in the unconscious. With an *oeuvre* traversing the organic and the inorganic, between animal, vegetal, human, and mechanical realms, Naum’s poems, and especially his novel *Zenobia* (1985), the metadiscourse is a kind of feedback loop of poetic feeling that incorporates Brauner’s painting, indicating that Brauner’s painting influenced Naum’s works as much as these works influenced Brauner’s painting.<sup>4</sup> But while Brauner used in his paintings an autonomy that language (because of its endlessly referential quality of words and the rules of grammar) never allowed, Naum had to overcome the habitual uses of language to make his art and to conduct in his own work a search for his magical self using not only surreal imagery and erotic energies connected to pre-literate mythical motifs but also broader aesthetic and literary possibilities from established European cultures. In its seamless prose that structurally resembles poetic expression and thought, *Zenobia* combines a narrative adaptation of the Romanian and international Avant-garde with a Modernist text that echoes T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the expressive French Surrealism of the 1920s and 1930s, and Andre Breton’s mystifying surrealist novel *Nadia*.

Like Breton’s *Nadia*, *Zenobia* incorporates startling, juxtaposed images that could easily be painted and an abundance of corporeal imagery not much different from the visual products of the Surrealist painters like Brauner, whose works intimate that surreal states are best attained through sexual encounters with the erotic double. But unlike Breton, whose *Nadia* has been criticized for its seemingly negative and exploitative views of women, Naum portrays in *Zenobia* a feminine double whose engagement in a wonderfully complex relationship with its male counterpart parallels twentieth-century feminist perspectives.

In addition to its feminocentric orientation that corresponds to Luce Irigaray’s view of woman as a “*sensible transcendental*” (Irigaray 144) and thus bridges in one more way the novel’s Avant-gardism with Modernity, *Zenobia* also resonates with the modernistic techniques of *The Waste Land*, another work that juxtaposes strange and apparently disparate, surreal images rooted in the unconscious. In the peculiar atmosphere of *Zenobia*, and associated with the mystical universality of the Romanian cosmos, Naum foregrounds the Tyresias-like, ancestral character of Dragoș, whose assessment of the world from a one-eye perspective also transcribes into the novel Brauner’s 1931 “Self- portrait” with one eye missing from a bleeding socket. Brauner’s prophetic portrait painted before the real loss of the artist’s eye during a fight,<sup>5</sup> as well as his subsequent works that focus on the eye, suggest the same capability of seeing the future as plainly as the past, which Naum attributes to Dragoș in the profound and occult sense that Romanian Avant-gardists felt could be reached through their art.

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<sup>4</sup> Gellu Naum’s poetry was published in the volumes *The Firing Traveler* (1936); *The Freedom to Sleep on a Forehead* (1937); *Vasco de Gama* (1940); *The Corridor of Sleep* (1944); *Medium* (1945); *The Terrible Forbidden* (1945); *The Blind Man’s Castle* (1946). Of these, the 1936 and 1937 volumes were illustrated by Brauner.

<sup>5</sup> According to Peggy Guggenheim, there was a row at a Surrealist party that ended with Brauner losing his eye, even though the painter had been an innocent onlooker. Dominguez, a surrealist painter, seized a bottle and hurled it at someone else, and it ended up shattering in Brauner’s eye. After being taken to a hospital by his friends, surgery was performed to remove the pieces of glass and replace the eye. A glass eye was bought and Brauner began to paint again, and very well, once he healed completely, maintaining the prophetic quality that had inspired him to paint himself as missing one eye even before the accident. The eye is a recurring image in Brauner’s work.

Other significant modernist techniques are effectively displayed in Camil Petrescu's *The Bed of Procustes*, a novel emblematic of the century's sexual anxiety and anesthesia and of the uninhabitable, fractured landscape that evokes a Procustean bed. The novel's parallel storylines animate male homosocial desire, a crisis of masculinity, and an acute dissociation of sensibility, akin to the "hysterical" disposition of T. S. Eliot's poetry and corresponding to his broodings in the famous essay praising the Metaphysical poets. In Petrescu's novel, the two male protagonists – a poet, whose cultural and personal anxieties both embody and perform male hysteria, and his modernist double, whose own sexual anxiety forges a hysterical identification with the poet that transcends male homosocial bonding – reflect modern man's aesthetic and cultural detachment and disembodiment that *The Bed of Procustes*, following Baudelaire, Pound, and Eliot, ultimately delineates.

Integrating early twentieth-century Romanian novel into the European circuit in spite of its specific, ethnic origins, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novels *Disheveled Maidens* (1926), *A Concert of Music by Bach* (1927), and *The Hidden Way* (1932)<sup>6</sup> interrupt Avant-garde experimentalism and follow the dictates of Lovinescu's Western-inspired theory of synchronism. A protégée of Lovinescu and a fixture at the literary gatherings he hosted every afternoon in his own house, Papadat-Bengescu carried out the critic's theories and revisionist aspirations in her own analytical fiction that focused on individual destinies and transformations and on shifting social environments. Conceptualized as a grand narrative that maps out Romania's progressive emancipation and democratization, the three novels that make up Papadat-Bengescu's Hallipa trilogy emphasize the importance of self-conscious aesthetic creation while relying on the inherited Western traditions of the realist, urban, and psychological narrative. As if performed on a stage, which is largely the Romanian capital of Bucharest between the wars, the novels offer a panoramic view of the political, cultural and economic context of Romania's institutions and society. The dynamics of the plot emerge in each novel from the use of such overlapping semiotic fields as text, music, fashion, architecture and interior design, industrialization, and even make up and women's clothing. In Papadat-Bengescu's fiction behavioral conventions are seen as a form of highly symbolic representations of the country's patriarchal society and cultural values, ideals, and aspirations, and of the writer's ambivalence in her views of gender, family, and social relations. Among the controversial aspects of the twentieth-century Romanian society in the interwar period, the trilogy tackles disruptive and traumatic domestic and social experiences reflected in the dissolution of the Hallipas' marriage; the growing emancipation of women discernable in the feminist tendencies of Mini, Lina Rim, Cora Perșu, Coca-Aimee, or the sexual awakening of Elena Drăgănescu; and political engagement and arrivism associated with the rise of characters like Lică the Trubadour (from penniless dandy to Parliament deputy) or the social climbing of Princess Ada and Jorj Drăgănescu.

The possible tensions between the cosmopolitan-modernist discourse of Papadat-Bengescu's fiction and the richness of the Romanian native myths and folkloric tradition promoted in the robust interwar journal *Gândirea* (*The Thought*, 1921-1944),<sup>7</sup> are transcended in the works of Mihail Sadoveanu, a novelist who revalorized the epic potential of Romanian folk ballads as a synthesis of local storytelling traditions (historical narratives, popular narratives, folktales) and Western influences. Sadoveanu's distinction between the literary and documentary value of folklore – "Not every folk production has value, only because it is popular. For the student of philology and folklore it may have value in itself; I, as a writer, am interested

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<sup>6</sup> The trilogy's novels in my translation are available as follows: *The Disheveled Maidens*, Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House, 2004; *A Concert of Music by Bach*, Craiova: Scrisul românesc, Fundația Editura 2005; *The Hidden Way*, Craiova: Scrisul românesc, Fundația Editura 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Co-founded by Cezar Petrescu, Gib Mihăescu and Adrian Maniu, *Gândirea*, especially after 1926 when Nechifor Crainic became its sole director-editor, rejected "westernization" in favor of "autochthonism" and rural culture that promoted ethnocentric models of culture.

only in its brilliance—” underscores the literary value of oral creations while at the same time praising their potential as models of literacy akin to Western counterparts. (Micu 11)

Mixing folk motifs and nationalist themes with Modernist techniques and Western models, Sadoveanu’s celebrated novels *The Hatchet* (1930) and *Tales from Ancuța’s Inn* (1928),<sup>8</sup> propose a particularly engaging compositional type of narrative that adapts orality and literacy to modernist discourse. As one of the opposing paradigms that shape critic Nicolae Manolescu’s view of literary history, we perceive the written versus the oral narration, and in each instance the intertwined texts allow for the coexistence and interaction of storytelling vis-à-vis orality and literacy. In investing his novels with the great energy required to re-trace over and over again such a well-known story as the *Miorița* ballad in *The Hatchet*, for example, Sadoveanu displays the independence of vision and personalization of creation that David Bordwell, in a different context, identifies and defines as the modernist impulse resulting from the association of a good story with innovation. Undercutting the orally inflected expectations of social restoration, of a return to and confirmation of the traditional order after the murderers of the slain shepherd are punished, the readers of *The Hatchet*, who are most likely familiar with the *Miorița* ballad, find themselves weighed down all along by the same type of anxieties that the start of a traditional narrative journey typically forments: where is Vitoria Lipan (Sadoveanu’s protagonist) going? Where will she end up? Will she make it? In legitimating such questions in a retold tale that retains a stubborn vitality, Sadoveanu’s story confers on the oral perpetuity of the ballad the new self-consciousness of archetypal characters (peasants, shepherds, cattle-dealers) born out of eminently eloquent narrative expression.

Engaging the readers in the shift from the orally inflected space of Romanian country inns and storytelling communicated as recycled recollections, Sadoveanu’s *Tales from Ancuța’s Inn* makes further use of orality to project the cultural specificity of the Romanian inn into the confines of literacy. Like Harry Bailey’s Tabard in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Ancuța’s Inn acquires in Sadoveanu’s text a legitimacy found only in the literately inflected. The tendency to add a great deal of local color into a literately inflected narrative that brings together surreal prose and modernist techniques, complete with a scrambling of temporal and spatial categories, a propensity for irony and attention to the stylistic rather than the ideological aspects of the prose, and a free approach to language, reaches canonical heights in Ștefan Agopian’s novel *Velvet Tache* (1980). With its chatty wisdom and monologic performance of a protagonist who writes his memoirs posthumously, *Velvet Tache* is an unforgettable account of a narrator who experiences all kinds of ruptures between the first-person narrating self and the experiencing self, and between the mythic space of childhood, nourished by the imagery of oral folk tales and fantastic historical accounts, and the alienating world of a tormented chapter in nineteenth-century Southwestern Romanian history. In Tache’s journey from childhood through maturity and death, the narrative reveals, by implication, the shifts and readjustments of Romanian society in its fight for independence against the Ottoman Empire and in its transition from patriarchal village culture (transmitted primarily through folklore, myth, and superstition) to incipient, modern statehood.

The chosen locale of *Velvet Tache* reveals a region of Romania that Agopian singles out, a region that he implies was obscured, lost, or effaced in other narrative and historical accounts. To read of such events as those the novel foregrounds from the inside of the protagonist Tache’s mind gives readers a better understanding of what occurred and what has been lost in historical accounts of these events. In employing fiction as a means of examining and questioning history, *Velvet Tache* also proposes a narrative alternative history that develops a dramatic tale in the face of mounting political oppression. Published at the height of Nicolae Ceausescu’s regime of terror in Communist Romania, Agopian’s novel challenges more than any

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<sup>8</sup> Translations of Sadoveanu’s novels are available as follows: *Tales from Ancuța’s Inn*, trans. Ileana Orlich, Bucharest: The Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House, 2004; *The Hatchet*, Bucharest: Minerva Publishing House, 1983.

other novel of the 1980s the dominance of the state-imposed Realism. The Southwestern province of Oltenia, which was, incidentally, the hated dictator's native region, offers a complex interplay between the novel's labyrinthine narrative, with its convoluted stories of the Romanian past infused with the magic of myth and folklore, and the larger implications of Tache's narrative. Its compensatory vision of reality attempts, in the established mode of Magical Realism, to create tranquility by reflecting on the absurdity of life and by presenting characters as pawns of unknown and powerful forces.

Whether they offer an interplay between a national tradition and cosmopolitan orientation, emphasize the importance of their innovative aesthetic production, or require a reconsideration of the role of folklore in the formation of the literary canon, the novels discussed in this essay cannot claim in their individual or collective examination anything more than a single (but not totalized) representation of what the nineteenth-century historian Nicolae Bălcescu called "ideas and sentiments of the time." In this sense, far from commanding the notion of a single and all-embracing narrative, these works represent important exemplars, but not the only ones to stand for the richness of the twentieth-century Romanian novel.

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