

The young Eugen Ionescu between Dada existentialism and the Balkan tradition of the absurd

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Enfant terrible of the literary criticism in Romania of the 1930s Eugen Ionescu, playwright of the absurd and author of existential-confessional literature in Paris Eugène Ionesco, was obstructed, from the start, by two opposing forces. On the one hand – the panic of the *ființa mică* – a small being, a weak and unprotected small being, before the voiding and transindividual Force. On the other – the need to have an audience, the need for applause. It is as if the staging of his own anxieties – their transformation into successful performances – would have made his life bearable, freeing him from complexes. This fear, superimposed over family and identity traumas, explains, to some extent, both the relative self-loathing and his abhorrence of any ideology that requires devotion in the name of collective ideals.

IONESCU BEFORE IONESCO: DADAIST THEATRICALITY IN ELEGII PENTRU FIINȚE MICI AND NU

The debut volume *Elegii pentru ființe mici* (Elegies for Little Beings, 1931), with its miniature vision of a vulnerable and precarious being, operated by uncontrollable forces in a Guignol-type existence, involuntarily encounters the theatrical marionettistic conceptions of Edward Gordon Craig.¹ In the first monograph dedicated to the author's Romanian period, Gelu Ionescu wishes to point out that:

In Cl. Bonnefoy's *Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco*, the author of the *Elegies* evoked the puppet shows in the Luxembourg Gardens. It is almost striking, as before scenic deployments given by the author, in which many characters behave as puppets, Eugène Ionesco used to play his favourite and haunting childhood show in his *Elegies*. Their world might be thus similar to a naïve 'pocket size' version of that which would populate his plays. If Eugène Ionesco's poetry itself is devoid of significance, it can be read, as shown above, under the sign of anticipation (Ionescu 1991, 221).

In *Elegii pentru ființe mici* there is also an affinity with the infantile, programmatic playfulness of Tristan Tzara's poetry, as well as with the sad pre-avant-gardist clownish pieces of Ion Vinea composed under the influence of Jules Laforgue. There is additionally a *sui generis* Franciscanism associated with the invocation of an inaccessible *little God*, the elegiac tone implying, by definition, lyrical, melancholic, and sepulchral laments.

Significantly, the first texts published by Eugen Ionescu in the Saint Sava High School magazine in Bucharest are focused on childhood and belief. Literary critic Dan C. Mihăilescu argues that the author of the small but controversial volume of critical essays titled *Nu* (No, 1934) was driven by a “ludic demon, playing everything in the area of the self”. And here the opposition of the “enfant terrible” (who is, at the same time, an old child) is relevant for the “acneiform adolescentism” of the majority of his congeners; for, if “Ionescu’s aggressiveness was a childish, spoiled one”, the others evolved in a “pubertal, troubled and violent frenzy, easily falling prey to excesses”, including those of the political type (Mihăilescu 2001, 86).

When he saluted the strange existentialist and surrealist novel *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată* (Adventures in Immediate Unreality, 1936) by Max Blecher, who was ill with skeletal tuberculosis, Ionescu’s comprehension of the text was mainly due to the fact that he identified himself with the biographical experience of the young writer in the most intimate way: “If we cannot become children again, we should break things apart through lucidity, and the hero has a strong sense of the profound unreality of the reality; through lucidity he realizes that the world is some serious mystification.” Moreover, Ionescu adds: “the mature world is a fake world, of a pure metaphysical unusefulness” (1992, 1, 277–278). His infantilism may be related to the theatrical challenges in the *Dada Manifestos* of Tristan Tzara, with everything they might involve: disdainful semantic and lexical deconstruction of the militaristic bourgeoisie of World War I, relativism exacerbated to the level of nihilistic playfulness, quasi-Buddhist paradoxes, and the buffoonish unity of opposites, carnivalesque wit, and bitter humour. The self-derisive rhetoric of the Dadaist manifestoes (“ladies and gentlemen, [...] I reckon I am a funny guy”) is found abundantly in the defiant and zany essays of *Nu* – but not only there. And on the other hand, everything is filtered through a typical ‘existentialism’, in which lyrical lament and the romantic-metaphysical frisson are also present.

If the young Mircea Eliade recovered from the avant-garde, dissident futurism of Giovanni Papini (in spirit and attitude, not to the letter), the young and individualist Eugen Ionescu, an opponent of both warrior Futurism and revolutionary Surrealism, was a supporter of the Romanian pre-Dadaist movement. His preferences were explicitly directed toward Ion Vinea, Tzara, and Urmuz. In a polemic with the literary critic Vladimir Streinu in 1935, he would oppose those authors – as “founders of the modern poetic technique” – to the most important modern Romanian poet of the age, Tudor Arghezi (1880–1967), and to his “abundant, but prolix verbalism” (Ionescu 1992, 1, 74). It should be noted that, at that time, almost the all modern Romanian criticism was praising Arghezi as the most important Romanian poet after Mihai Eminescu (the 19th century romantic poet, considered a national poet). The poems of pre-avant-gardist Vinea were praised in contrast as “marvellous” and “admirable”, as the *Cântecul de război* (The War Song) of pre-Dadaist Tzara: “so lapidary a poetry, so fashionable, so intense, so elliptical, equalled by Tzara’s wonderful verse only” (ibid). Ranked as inferior in terms of innovative authenticity to Urmuz, Tzara, and Vinea, Arghezi was labelled “a usurper”, indebted to a traditional idea, hidden behind a “verbal inventiveness”, which nevertheless remained deeply roo-

ted in a space of “irremediable and rudimentary inferiority”. Polemically countering Streinu’s pro-Argheziian partisanship, Eugen Ionescu denied Arghezi the “authenticity” of experience and the “originality” of expression, and criticized the “exterior” character of the “technique”, the formalism and manner of his work: “Poetry is valid when the poetic experience is authentic and the poetic expression is original, because originality stems from authenticity, which is extremely clear and banal. It is needless to restate that Arghezi is technical, exterior and a (Biblical) Mannerist” (ibid).

Without a doubt, Ionescu’s rejection of Arghezi’s literary value was an error. Still, he was right, unlike Romanian modernist critics such as Vladimir Streinu and Șerban Cioculescu, when he challenged Arghezi’s primacy in terms of the reform of the art of poetry. Unlike Vinea and Tzara, however, in 1915 – at that time, they were both deconstructors of canonical language and inventors of poetic formulae rather than true creators – Arghezi was a true creator of modernist language in poetry, and that creation in question was made by a naturalisation of modernism. At this phase, however, Ionescu is rather a supporter of radical negation and of playfully purifying revolt. In terms of his constant sympathy for Ion Vinea, it would be worth mentioning that he contributed to his review, *Facla*, in the first half of the 1930s.

There are certain Dadaist affinities in Ionescu’s *Nu*,² especially in the sequences of the second part titled *Fals itinerar critic* (False critical itinerary). This volume, which outraged his contemporaries, is hard to categorize, being situated somewhere between literary criticism, essay and intimate diary. It aimed at ridiculing the institution of literary criticism from the perspective of a relativism of values, moving towards a nihilism and a radicalism that places existential experience before any intellectual construct. At the same time, it is also the identity manifesto of a young man frustrated by being part of a lesser culture and lacking an international audience (“If I was born French, I would have been perhaps a genius” [Ionescu 2002, 260], Ionescu said, before he actually went to France to become an important figure in European dramaturgy). Here, the essayist’s deconstructive appetite was to be exerted on language itself (and on the existence that gives it shape), exposing its vacuity, its absurdity, and its lack of meaning, going as far as to what would later be called “the tragedy of language”. The theatricality displayed in the tragicomic rhetoric in many sequences in this section reminds the reader of the register of Dadaist “proclamations” to the bourgeois in Tzara’s *Manifestos*: “After all, dear Sir, my spiritual situation is as sad as possible (tra-la-la!)” (ibid, 208) or “I open my mouth: ‘a’ and I wonder, ‘ris’ and I laugh ‘to’ and open the eyes, and then, because that’s what I want: ‘tel’. And there was A-ris-to-tel. But if I said O-bo-bo or O-bi-bi there would have been nothing to it; because I did not want in the first place” (ibid, 183). Further on, with reference to a verse from *Elegii*: “I. Who is this I? And what is who? The poor, the fool, the beloved I: I loved myself as I was” (ibid). Here, the language crisis opens directly to the metaphysical crisis of the self, in fact to the anguish of the being-for-death in the Heideggerian sense.

The theatrical character in *Nu* was noticed by most commentators who reviewed the book, particularly those in the author’s generational cohort, and it was also highlighted in a review published by the rationalist critic Șerban Cioculescu, who

recommended that Ionescu develop his talent in the genre of drama (Cioculescu 1934). Indeed, *Nu* has a compositional theatricality confirmed not only by the numerous teachings and appeals to the public (“Ladies and Gentlemen!”, “Gong!”), by the dramatic monologues and the directorial character, but also by its whole structure. Ionescu had already manifested his mimetic talent to his friends in their adolescence; he also admitted that he had written a patriotic play when he was 13 (Ionescu 1992, 49). The *Nu* volume actually staged an inner drama in which the author is playing himself (with his critical masks) and is playing his own character. The dramatic character is no longer located only at the level of the small beings in his poetry. It is ultimately a play about the backstage of literary criticism, which challenges its authority lacking an axiological foundation; a play about the backstage of criticism and the critic, where the backstage is the interiority and the critical stage is the exteriority of the being. The protagonist himself asserted in the chapter *Idei cap în cap* (Conflicting Ideas) that “the diary has the huge advantage to portray scenes that, for the knowledge of the truth, are infinitely more interesting than those put together by the director and prompter. I love to see life without a prompter!” (Ionescu 2002, 255) and that, unlike the novel, the diary – a musical score of the ephemeral life, of the provisional *par excellence* – does not “bluff” the Creation:

That the journal has optical defects, objectivity, truth, honesty flaws, is a fact – but how unimportant this little bluff is in comparison to the catastrophic bluff of recreating life. We can keep, about ourselves, nothing else but dried documents which eventually become unreadable. God gave us life so that we may lose it, or let it slip between our fingers, so that it may die. No derogation from this law is possible (ibid, 256).

Assumed melodramatically (for the young Ionescu, ancient tragedy had been replaced by melodrama in the age of rationalist modernity [1931, 54–55]), the end of the book warns against relativizing death through cultural trivialization: “brought into culture” death becomes subject, fashion, cliché and convention, and it will be inevitably ruled out as “obsolete” (Ionescu 2002, 272–274). The gradual increase in “problematic intensity” was to become a feature of the upcoming plays, which was noticed and analysed as such by the critic Matei Călinescu in a book on Ionescu’s/Ionesco’s “identity and existential themes” (Călinescu 2006, 81–83).

In a diary entry recorded in *Nu*, the young essayist focuses on two atrocious scenes, where death takes up the forefront again. A metaphysical conclusion (“We’re just some ridiculous children, left alone in this world, to leave in this collapsing house. We’re playing by the abysses, with our dolls” (Ionescu 2002, 72) opens, psalmically, with consideration of his own existential condition, the authenticity of death blowing apart the protective lie of criticism: “I humbly ask you, please, do not open my eyes over the void! Everything’s collapsing! Everything’s collapsing! My roar is weak as a mere sigh. There’s nothing we could do but close our eyes. Let’s do literary criticism. So that death may catch us with our backs turned to it, doing some literary criticism” (ibid, 73). The pathos of these notations is denounced *après-coup* by a theatrical *mocquerie*, in a teaching intended to protect him from ridicule in front of public: “(To be read in ternary tone, dramatically, and in tears). I can no longer stand the fear! So much fear, so much fear, so much fear! etc., etc.” (ibid, 86–87). This has

its empiricist-sensualistic explanation: “I do not believe in God, I do not believe in metempsychosis, I do not believe in immortality, I have never believed in any kind of spirit since I felt, for real, how I forget, how thought slips through my fingers – in the air, probably” (ibid, 207). In fact, Ionescu turns Pascal’s wager against literature, substituting the double advantage of faith in God with the double disadvantage of literary practice: “Ladies and Gentlemen, there is a God, or there is no God. If there is a God, it makes no sense for us to deal with literature. If there is no God, again it makes no sense for us to deal with literature” (ibid, 266–267). For him, the “unimportance” of the individual in the universe – following the path of high Romanticism – is derived from the absence of divine omnipotence:

I have never managed to get fully used to existence, be that of the world, of the others or, especially, to my own. I happen to feel how the shapes are emptied, all of a sudden, of their content, reality is unreal; words are but some meaningless noises; these houses, the sky it – are but the facades of nothingness; people seem to move automatically, without reason; everything seems volatilize, everything is threatened-including myself – to crash silently, imminently, in some abyss, beyond day and night. What sorcery can keep all this together? (Ionescu 1992, 170–171)

THE ISSUE OF DEATH AND THE LIMITS OF LITERATURE

Ionescu’s small being, a victim of metaphysical ridicule, feels captive, exiled, thrown into a hostile world. This is a major theme of Existentialist thought, seen through a Gnostic filter:

... I can’t run away, I am trapped, as Dostoyevsky, that Russian, and his Shestov say; I don’t even know if I can kill myself, that is, if suicide is effective. (How could I imagine setting myself free through suicide, when it would trigger a greater punishment and I would be locked up in a cell, there in the pit?) Because we all die. Because the most troubling presence is this presence of death, which lives in us, which we can smell, which we inhale from the flowers around, from the air. That death I can see on my lover’s lips, whose bitter taste I can feel in my mouth (Ionescu 2002, 267).

Beyond the fallacy of the representation of death (in which Ionescu sees only the sepulchral captivity of the body), the relativisation of suicide is not trivial. Literary vanity is exhibited in a histrionic manner that is quite similar to Tzara’s Dadaism. Assuming physical weakness, precariousness, vulnerability, and metaphysical finitude runs side by side with the envy expressed sarcastically towards cultural authorities of the time such as Tudor Vianu and Nichifor Crainic on the grounds that they “have an axis, a support, four cardinal points and God, whom they hold by his heel, with their three teeth” (ibid, 209). Nevertheless, his personal anguish and longing for success are inseparable: “If I had all the successes in the world; if I were the morning star of Romanian literary thought; if my lover would love me with constant love throughout my life – I’d be equally unhappy. I am very much aware of this. That doesn’t prevent me from wishing for the worldly successes etc., though” (ibid).

Not just the poets, but also the major novelists and literary critics³ challenged in *Nu* become characters on stage, as well as discourses, musical scores, and registers. The infusion of intimate diary, confession, and anecdotal elements collected inquisi-

tively behind the public masks opens to a tragic sense of life, an eminently personal, private feeling, which ridicules the public vanities of reason. The main figures are figures of derision, of compromise, and of ridiculing. Ultimately, *Nu* is not a hybrid volume. It contains both the qualities of the playwright and those of the author of confessional literature, practiced intermittently in Romania and that it would later prevail in Paris through *Journal en miettes* (Fragments of a Journal, Ionesco 1967) and other titles.

In one of the last articles published before he moved to France for good, the death obsession opened toward the identity issue, dealing with the other, no less haunting, issue of overcoming the status of a minor culture. Written in Paris but published in Romania, *Note despre om și poezie* (Notes on Man and Poetry, 1938) is, in its first part, a demonstrative incursion into the history of modern European poetry. For Ionescu, Romanticism had been compromised “by discursiveness, by abstraction, by intellectuality imitating that of the philosopher, but somewhere at the periphery” (Ionescu 1992, 110). We thus better understand his aversion towards Victor Hugo, who is seen as a French Arghezi. Instead, death becomes the revealer of authenticity, with the Symbolist and decadent poetry that removes it from literature to place it in life. And that, in other words, no longer addresses it externally, but ontologizes it:

And if ‘death’ is an interesting theme of the Romantic poets and if, for them, it can be ‘poetic’, for the so-called decadent and symbolist poets it troubles us: it becomes morbidity, decay, obsession, fear, sometimes undeclared, sometimes unknown and, instead of exposing itself in stanzas and stanzas, it, when expressed, betrays itself. The unauthentic theme has thus become life, concrete substance, authenticity: speech and composition have become shivers, shrieking (ibid, 111).

The validity of this finding is not to be discussed – what is significant is the way in which Ionescu’s sensitivity assumes it. In Verlaine’s poetry “death is present when it seems absent, when it is not named, when it is distant, (...) when people seem to be mere graceful and frail puppets in its hands” (ibid, 112). The article is given an additional relevance by transferring the discussion to the realm of Romanian literature. Unlike French literature, with its major stature, a literature that leads its spiritual experiences up to the limit, Romanian literature, according to Ionescu, places itself somewhere at the periphery of spiritual life:

Romanian poetry seems to have understood nothing from the burning, consumed experiences, the spiritual altitude and spiritual violence of these poets. (...) It has taken from them, however, their aestheticizing concerns and, because, of course, people cannot live only on the heights, not even the great poets, Romanian literature has imitated the life and problems of these poets, when they were coming down to the valleys. Behold, therefore, how a movement against the ‘French influence’ can become justifiable, since, ‘French literature is inessential and just refined’ and so on. In fact, everywhere and always, the same issues apply to man. The worst: our condition, down here, in death; the possibility to climb up again. A man who does not question this, who does live his own essential drama is in truth crippled spiritually. There is no major culture without this problem and drama. The greatest poets are never social or psychologizing poets, but the poets grounded in essential issues; great artists are not those concerned with technique, but with living issues (ibid, 115).

Moral: regarded as the ultimate issue of the creative being, death can become an incentive for major creation, provided that it is assumed to the limit.

THE ROMANIAN PRECURSORS OF THE ABSURDIST PLAYWRIGHT

If the outer revolt, rupture, the individualism which negates everything pushed to the limits of nihilism, comic derision, and the carnivalesque and sometimes burlesque charge and meet in Eugène Ionesco, the attitude of the Dadaist Tzara, the lyric, elegiac lament relates him – and not only as a poet – to Ion Vinea (1895–1964), who was mentioned above. More complex and deeper still remain his literary ties with Urmuz (1883–1923) and those with Ion Luca Caragiale (1850–1912). Urmuz, who wrote under the pen name Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău, was discovered and published by Tudor Arghezi before he committed suicide for mysterious reasons. Thanks to 40–50 pages of concentrated and enigmatic prose work, texts drafted with Flaubertian rigour between 1907 and 1908 and composed originally for the amusement of his friends and family, which partook of an absurd nature similar to Alfred Jarry's extravagances, Urmuz had become a mythic figure of the Romanian avant-garde and was presented as an unknown forerunner of the European avant-garde.

A playwright and novelist with distant Greek origins, Ion Luca Caragiale was one of the most important classic authors of the main Romanian literary group called Junimea (Youth, a cultural society similar to the Slavonic Omladina) in the second half of the 19th century. His comedies and part of his satirical prose became the model of the genre and have, to this day, provided the most eloquent insight into Romanian peripheral, superficial, and caricaturizing modernization, the generator of deformities in language and mentality. As a Parisian playwright, Ionesco invoked more than once in his confessions about theatre his two prevailing Romanian models. If in the case of Caragiale, the “greatest of all unknown playwrights” (unknown outside Romania), the automatism and discursive delirium would be particularly emulated (the one-act comedy *Conul Leonida față cu reacțiunea* – Mr. Leonida facing counter-revolution is emblematic in this regard, but there are more examples), Urmuz is the ideal filter. Ionescu had planned in 1944, when he was a cultural attaché to the Government at Vichy, a French translation of Urmuz's work, accompanied by notes and a consistent presentation. He was going to translate it, as he himself had stated, “literally”, because “nothing else needs to be added” and it was “quite shocking in its (...) antiliterary (...) nakedness”, which actually gives it “value” (Ionescu, 1969). He even thought of a prestigious publishing house, Éditions de Minuit, Sagittaire or even Gallimard. In a letter dated 21 July 1949, the newly emerged playwright talked about an underground campaign carried out in Paris by Tristan Tzara and his “cronies” in order to hinder the publication of that translation (ibid). The motivation for this offensive would have been, beyond any financial reasons, Ionescu's preface which drew attention to the fact that “urmuzianism existed before Dadaism” and that “at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Tzara and Marcel Iancu put into practice what my friend Mitică [Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău] had invented” (ibid). The consequence: despite the enthusiastic opinion of Raymond Queneau and Jean Paulhan, who had recommended the publication of the text in the collection *Métamorphoses* (the latter

had promised to publish two stories in *Cahiers de la Pléiade*, followed by publication of the entire material at Gallimard), Ionesco's manuscript was rejected as insufficiently commercial.⁴ In 1967, *Akzente* magazine in Munich reprinted Ionesco's preface to the unpublished volume,⁵ where he briefly introduces the forerunners and associates of Urmuz (Tzara, Vinea, Marcel Iancu and others from the pre-avant-garde group) alongside the integral text in German of Urmuz's work known at that time.

A possible model for Ionesco's dramaturgy, ignored until recently, but whose texts were certainly not unknown to the young writer, may have been his friend Ionațan X. Uranus (1909–1984). He was a writer who specialized in the study of the Kabala, admired *guénonian* esoterism, and was publishing texts strongly influenced by Urmuz in the press of his period. Uranus also edited an ephemeral review of esoteric studies, *Memra*, together with Mircea Eliade.⁶ Modest in value, but not lacking in high spirits, the few dramatic vignettes⁷ published by Uranus in periodicals such as *Bilet de papagal* (1928) and *Zodiac* (1930) prefigure Ionesco's absurd plays. Urmuzianism filtered through Ion Luca Caragiale, as well as through the Dada experience, is found abundantly in the Romanian prototype of *La cantatrice chauve* with the Romanian title *Englezește fără profesor* (English without a teacher), drafted in 1948. In its Romanian version, as well as in its French version, *La cantatrice chauve* (1950) the behavioural clichés are translated into language clichés that are disorganized through Brownian motion and a burlesque mimicry of communication, representation, and theatricality. About the “birth of *La cantatrice chauve*”, an account of his attempt to learn English “without a teacher” by using a certain textbook and about “the tragedy of language” this experience triggered, Ionesco would narrate profusely after several years, in Paris, attributing the title to a random line spoken by actor Henry-Jacques Huet during the first rehearsals (Ionesco 1992, 187–196). Hazard is summoned to explain, therefore, everything. The Romanian scholar Matei Călinescu believes that the Parisian plays written by Ionesco in French between 1950 and 1952 “grow from that germinating nucleus; i.e. *La cantatrice chauve*/*The Bald Soprano*” (Călinescu 2006, 145). There are several Urmuzian elements in few of the later plays as well (*La leçon* – The Lesson, *Les chaises* – The Chairs, *L'Impromptu de l'Alma* – Improvisation, or The Shepherd's Chameleon and others). *La leçon* also contains a Dadaist-nihilistic influence in its apparently ‘idiotic’ character and the tragedy of language being regarded as a comic drama, and we find the same elements in plays such as *Les chaises*, *Jacques ou la soumission* (Jack, or The Submission) and *L'avenir est dans les oeufs* (The Future is in Eggs). However, there is also an outlier which shatters the “petty bourgeois” world starting from language stereotypes and thoughtless behaviour, mixing the burlesque with cruelty, and carnival with a touch of the grotesque in Caragiale's comedy/farce *D'ale carnavalului* (Off the Carnival) is elevated to the cube and passed through the filters of a heinous psychoanalysis, under the sign of tragicomedy typical of Ionesco.

“EXPORT MODERNISM” AND THE BALKAN TRADITION OF THE ABSURD

Just like some of his moderate rivals of the avant-garde such as Ion Vinea and Benjamin Fundoianu (the future French poet, essayist and philosopher Benjamin Fondane, in the foreword to his volume *Imagini și cărți din Franța* – Images and Books from France, [Fundoianu 1922]), Eugen Ionescu paradoxically diagnoses Romanian culture by using terminology of the conservative type, preferring initiative and, eventually, the assimilation of organic foreign models to imitation: “For the time being, we must study scientific, philosophical, literary issues, which so unconsciously and generously the West is giving us. (...) There are accidental stairs, which do not belong to us in any way, and which we are climbing holding a national flag. This is authenticity” (Ionescu 1992, 1, 50). Like Fundoianu, Eugen Ionescu rejects both modernist Occidentalism and rural, antimodernist traditionalism as minor imitations of foreign models. In addition, he foresees the existence of an influence he rehabilitates (in the sense of a fantastic realism of folkloric source):

French literature has used something from Latin literature (Ronsard, the Pléiade) and that something remained French literature; German literature has used the influence of French classicism and that remained German literature (...). Only the Romanian tree seems to be still unfructified or murdered by the graft. (...) I would be utterly distrustful of the Romanian lyric substance if there was no folklore poetry and if *Miorița* would not contradict me. If there was no tradition, in classical poetry, a tradition that follows a path parallel to the great, official, 1848 tradition – Romanian tradition that is overshadowed by the vain brilliance of the other tradition: Filimon, Pann, Ion Luca Caragiale in Kir Ianulea, Creangă and Mateiu Caragiale; and if Eminescu did not prove that, by miracle, a Romanian poet would be able to subdue and overcome foreign prospects. The numerous Romanian poetry – Lamartinian with Alecsandri, Baudelairian with Arghezi, and Mallarméan with Ion Barbu (ibid, 51–52).

Eugen Ionescu is only partly right, even in accordance with his own assumptions. Through a major part of his work, the hermetic poet Ion Barbu (1895–1961) belongs – programmatically – to the Balkan literary realm, a fact which Ionescu himself admitted in a presentation of Romanian literature for the French public in a piece titled *La littérature roumaine* dating from 1955 and included in *Clartés – Encyclopédie du Présent*, published in Paris. Nevertheless, his vision appears substantially different in the Parisian exile, from the one he had in the interwar period, becoming virtually identical to the synchronist-Occidentalist and anti-traditionalist vision of modernist critic and ideologist Eugen Lovinescu (1881–1943). This is actually true with reference to the new (superlative) assessments of Ion Barbu and Tudor Arghezi, whose modernism is no longer considered a superficial imitation, but a proof of the balance between the national background and European innovation.

Symmetrical in relation to the virulent rejection of Occidentalist synchronism by counter-modernists in the interwar period, the young Ionescu identifies Romanian rural traditionalism with an import – this time, romantic German ideology, which stands at an equal distance from national authenticity:

I do know very well that a nation cannot be thrown away as one disposes of an old shirt or sock. But it can be overcome. To overcome does not mean to relinquish, but also to

contain, to master. Being exclusively local, exclusively national means to really put on the shirt over the clothes; the nation over the heart. But the shirt and nation should be covered. However, because we don't want to look a little bit, because we want to show our shirts and nationalism to the world – the western coat has come closer to us, to the skin, than the Romanian shirt. Just because we care so much about our authenticity and specificity, we are so inauthentic and non-specific. But we cannot rediscover ourselves unless we leave ourselves behind (Ionescu 2002, 197).

The last sentence was to be confirmed by Ionesco himself, after leaving for France. In fact, the young poet was looking for a third way: neither modernist imitation nor autochthonous traditionalism that ignores intellectual origins. The alternative he had in mind would have been represented by the ignored, repressed, marginalized Balkan tradition, the only truly genuine and productive one. The author avoids, however, using the terms Balkan or Balkanism. Even in his first Romanian period of literary writing, Eugen Ionescu is an ideological opponent of tradition's potentially repressive, ideological counterfeiting. He is, however, by no means an irrationalist spirit, but a defender of personalist spirituality (which would draw him near the position of Emmanuel Mounier and the *Esprit* journal in Paris), a spirituality understood as inner experience of freedom and of individual revolt against dogmas. There is, for him, a good aspect of tradition (authentic) and a bad one (formal, hierarchical, and politically connected). Likewise, there is also a good assumption of religiousness/spirituality and a bad one. The former is related to the identification with the image of the Mother, and the latter to the identification with the image of the Father.⁸ It should be noted that the Mother's ethnic impureness, with Jewish and Greek roots, corresponds to the crossover (the chaotic ethnic impureness, hybridisation) of Balkanism. It should also be noted that, including the period when he served as cultural attaché to the Romanian Embassy in Vichy, Ionescu declared himself hostile to "Balkan mythology", which had "kept us out of time" (Ionescu 1992, 2, 215), thus falling over an Orientalist stereotype – in the sense developed by Edward Said – of Romanian modernization, and meeting the ethnic self-criticism practiced at that time, among others, by Emil Cioran in his famous essay *Schimbară la față a României* (Transfiguration of Romania, 1936). What agreement can be thus found between such allegations and his previous vision? A possible answer would be: through the paradoxical, contradictory spirit of the author. Or through a Balkanism which was not assumed as such, but acknowledged precisely as an underground, original tradition within Romanian culture.

Referring to the success the avant-gardist artists Constantin Brâncuși and Marcel Iancu, as well as the poet Tristan Tzara had abroad, the journalist and poet Ion Vinea remarked in a polemical article, a decade ahead of Eugen Ionescu, that "for the first time we offered the world something that is missing". And by this, he was speaking about the existence of an "export (Romanian) modernism", and not modernism that only offered subdued imitations of European cultures. The same Vinea also identified a possible "tradition" of abstractionism in Byzantine art and nonfigurative rural folklore, in the "abstractionism" of the drawings on peasant rugs, etc. (Vinea 1924, 101–102). Young Ionescu may have thought of a similar modernism. Urmuz himself had been claimed by Vinea and his avant-gardist movement as forerunner of this

revolutionary and subversive line (Urmuz – Dada – Surrealism). Eugen Ionescu (who meanwhile became Eugène Ionesco) showed in the above-mentioned issue of *Les lettres nouvelles* (1965) the author of *Pagini bizare* (Bizarre Pages), Urmuz, “as one of the forerunners of the universal literary revolt, one of the prophets of the dislocation of social forms, of the language and thinking of this world, which is disaggregating today before us, an absurd world, as our author’s heroes” (Ionesco 1965, 71–82). In the early 1930s, Ionescu frequently mocks a defining complex of Romanian modernity, the obsession with “what Europe would say?” i.e., the constant comparison with prestigious Western models. In various forms, often as political extremism, overcoming this complex of a so-called minor and peripheral culture would constitute the basic mission of the existentialist generation of 1930s Romania, a pattern that was to be illustrated at the international level by the triple exile of Eliade, Cioran, and Ionesco. Inside this preponderantly anti-Balkan generation, Eugen Ionescu is the only one who attempted the literary rehabilitation of the stigmatized category of Balkanism. He did so in the direction chosen by his congeners Eliade, Cioran & co., by overcoming cultural minority and provincialism and affirming an authentic and original identity.

Drafted in Romanian literature, with the decisive contribution of the poet Ion Barbu, who tried to rehabilitate it aesthetically and spiritually by removing its stigma of Occidental modernization, “literary Balkanism” (see Muthu 2002) was critically accredited – under the sign of radical modernity of the avant-garde – in George Călinescu’s *History of Romanian Literature de la origini pînă în prezent* (History of Romanian Literature from its Beginnings to the Present, 1941), where Tzara and Urmuz are placed alongside the abstract modernists Ion Vinea and Ion Barbu, and in the aestheticizing, decadent-Balkan prose of Mateiu Caragiale (1885-1936), the playwright Ion Luca Caragiale’s son, in the series “Dadaists. Surrealists. Hermetics”. Călinescu found a significant psychological formula for the representatives of this special category: “the great distorted sensitive” writers (Călinescu 1988, 774).⁹

Unfortunately, the young Eugen Ionescu did not insist enough in his articles on this issue, even though it was presented as representing authentic traditions. Nor would he do so later on in Paris. Nevertheless, the subversive Balkanic tradition inherited from the Caragiale-Urmuz-Dada triad, and which he contested at times on ideological grounds, does indeed include the internationally acclaimed French playwright, with his buffoonish, tragicomic, all-relativizing absurdism.

NOTES

- ¹ It is the Uber-Marionettes concept in which actors may be replaced with puppets, regarded as an optimization of man (see Craig, 1968). Craig was a director appreciated by the Young Generation of interwar Romania, as well by Eugen Ionescu and his congeners. Closest to him was Haig Acterian, with whom he had a wide correspondence.
- ² All *Nu* references are cited from its second edition, 2002.
- ³ Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu, Camil Petrescu, Eugen Lovinescu, Mircea Eliade and others, the main personalities of the Romanian inter-war modernity.
- ⁴ Just after Tzara’s death (in December 1963), Ionesco’s 1949 preface appeared, under the title

Précurseurs roumains du Surréalisme. Urmuz (1965), of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, led by Maurice Nadeau, along with a presentation signed by Jacques G. Costin – Urmuz’s rival from the *Contimporanul* review of Ion Vinea and Marcel Iancu, who immigrated to France’s capital in 1960.

⁵ Translated into Romanian by Sașa Pană.

⁶ The title *Memra* was nothing else but the translation in Hebrew of *Cuvântul* (The Word) – the newspaper of nationalist ideologist Nae Ionescu and the main rostrum of the young spiritualist generation.

⁷ Uranus 1928, 1930.

⁸ See Petreu 2012, Ionescu 2003.

⁹ See also Vajdová 2010.

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The young Eugen Ionescu between Dada existentialism and the Balkan tradition of the absurd

Eugen Ionescu/Eugène Ionesco. Dada existentialism. Balkanism. Absurdism. Modernism. Cultural identity.

This study focuses on the relationship between the early writing of Romanian author Eugen Ionescu's (who was to become, after 1949, the French writer Eugène Ionesco) and his avant-garde plays, from the perspective of the relationship with the Romanian tradition of the absurd. On the one hand, the study discusses the playwright's, the poet's, and the essayist's particular affinity with the Dada spirit of Tristan Tzara and Urmuz (an atypical forerunner of the avant-garde). However, on the other hand, through his constant admiration for Ion Luca Caragiale, whom he considered the greatest unknown playwright in the world, Ionescu regains a repressed, but authentic and productive Balkan tradition, located somewhere between traditionalism and modernism, which was an object of obsession for the intellectuals in interwar Romania. By assuming and exporting it to the Parisian stage, the author's ambiguous Romanian and French identity tries to break free from the complex of belonging to a peripheral culture, lacking access to universality. The fusion between Dadaist playful anarchism and the Balkan tradition of the absurd implies, in Ionescu's case, the discovery and recovery of an alternative modernity, with a considerable subversive potential. Its elements can be found in his essay-volume *Nu* (No, 1934), whose playful and nonconformist existentialism, with a metaphysical scent and a deconstructive vitality, contains the embryo of all the playwright's later qualities, which can be traced to his *La cantatrice chauve* (The Bald Soprano) and *La leçon* (The Lesson).

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