

THE SPIRIT OF REBELLION AND THE AESTHETIC OF “RUPTURE” IN THE POETS OF THE “WAR GENERATION”

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Abstract: In the landscape of outstanding aesthetic diversity of Romanian literature of the '40s, the "War Generation" plays a special role. The young writers, mostly poets, grouped around the Albatros magazine, advocates the separation from the literary tradition, from the "outdated" aesthetic canons, and the renewal of poetry. In their vision, poetry should descent in the immediate reality, inspire from the everyday existence, from its mundane, common, bleak aspects, from the ugly and sordid, on behalf of the genuine life, unfalsified by anachronistic canons, patterns and visions. The new aesthetic involves the refusal of aesthetics, exploitation of reality and existence in all respects, the aesthetic of ugliness, in an anti-aesthetic and "antipoetic" vision. The poets write on behalf of the future, and their poetry is crossed by a messianic air. The war offers them a fruitful framework of objectification of their conception of poetry. Fundamentally polemical, the new poetry assumes a prophetic function in the dramatic wait for the new times. The aesthetic "revolution" started by the young poets will be suddenly stopped yet by the institution of the communist regime in Romania. The future invoked by them in their polemical and messianic poems will turn to a nightmare. The "War Generation" will become the "Lost Generation".

Keywords: the war generation, aesthetic revolution, new poetry, messianism, the lost generation

The “war generation” and the poetics of negation

The literary landscape of the '40s has an unprecedented richness and aesthetic diversity in Romanian literature. A particular case during this age of literary effervescence is the “war generation,” the so-called “lost generation”, made up of young writers gathered, for the most part, around the *Albatros* magazine, edited by Geo Dumitrescu. Among them there are such names as Ion Caraion, Constant Tonegaru, Victor Todynopol, C. T. Lituon, Sergiu Ludescu, Ben Corlaci, Alexandru Lungu, Mihail Crama, Sergiu Filerot, Veronica Porumbacu, Iordan Chimet, but other authors, too, recorded by literary history in various degrees. All of them share the idiosyncrasy towards the old world, towards a lifestyle having nothing in common with reality, defined by a philosophy of impassiveness towards canonical and academic literature, the desire to denounce “traditional” poetry, to prove its aesthetic caducity, its falseness and its deeply bookish nature, which turns it into an exhibit worthy of the museum of literature. Naturally, all of these opinions, especially those referring to poetry, are deeply arguable. Their justification has to do with the movements and quakes of youth psychology, with the dialectics of an impetuous becoming, which makes use of its strength and the disarming enthusiasm of its age. Youth, above all, warrants the young poets of the “war generation” in their protesting endeavour, and not necessarily their aesthetic arguments.

This generation acts on the stage of literature and life in a tragic time of history, the Second World War. Therefore, the war is part of its historical and literary identity, summarized in the phrase “the war generation”. Historically and psychologically, it is a time of emergency and crisis, when irrationality, cynicism, savagery, cruelty, murder, genocide encroaches upon human existence, which they transform into a vast theatre of manifestation. A theatre of the absurd and suffering, in which the people are victims, the victims of ideologies and doctrines, the victims of the lack of reason and primary instincts, the victims of

suffering and death. On the aesthetic level, the war is a complex thematic framework, which gives young poets a fertile and tragic ground of literary expression. In this context, the poetry of protest arises, in polemical and provocative metamorphoses, with violent and accusatory accents to the status quo, to history and human weakness. This poetry accuses the absurdity of existence, the tragic human crisis, dehumanization, alienation and cruelty of the human being. Against this background, it emerges the hope in new times, in the rebirth of man and of human existence, under the sign of reason and of the future. Thus, in such a framework of hope and expectation, it is crystallized the idea of “the new poetry”, to express rebirth, the dawn of a new era of man and his humanity. In a messianic enthusiasm, the young poets put human existence, in its ontological and aesthetic dimensions, under the auspices of the new, which they associate with hope, good, bright and fruitful future. It is a utopian projection that history will deny, in the cruellest way. A naive utopia to history, that will give them instead a bleak dystopia, the communism. The young writers, animated by revolts and ideals, angry on the present and confident in the future, weary and hopeful, will fall victim, in one form or another, to this historic nightmare, to this negative utopia, unfortunately, as real as possible. That is why, the “war generation” will become, on the levels of the history of literature and of the personal existence, the “lost generation”.

The gesture of aesthetic separation of the “war generation” will not crystallise in a literary movement per se. What was becoming, by the young writers’ assembling around the *Albatros* magazine, a promise of aesthetic coagulation and definition into an ideological shape of wide scope remained a fleeting moment, albeit remarkable, in the history of literature, once the magazine closed in the terrible conditions of censure during the war and in the historic post-war circumstances. History and the individual dramas and tragedies of many of this promising group of writers discouraged their desire for change that seemed to fall into place, broke the coherence and continuity of a process that was asserting itself. Many were silent for various reasons, a few died young (Constant Tonegaru, C. T. Lituon, Sergiu Ludescu), some recovered and evolved individually on their own aesthetic systems, free from any ideology. At the beginning of the ‘40s, however, their poetry shares the desire to deny, to dispute, to defy and to insult the petty bourgeois spirit of literature, the canonical literary mindset, defined, in the young people’s iconoclastic view, by convenience, by a laziness of thinking, by a barren cult of formal symmetries, by a betrayal of reality and bookish falsification, by sterility and incapacity. The arguments of the poets who denounce in often violent and sarcastic terms the mindset of their contemporaries or the aesthetic forms are arguable and are not always founded, especially from a literary point of view. There are, however, in the scope of these attacks, some vulnerable targets, some of them even of great literary quality, with aesthetic orientations that have more to do with tradition.

A hint of denial floats throughout the whole inter-war period, as we have seen, from the first avant-gardists to the last surrealists. These defying attitudes, proclaiming the need for renewal, are in some way part of the tradition of protest, which began in the ‘20s with the manifestos written by Vineanu, Voronca, Geo Bogza, etc. and which was carried through between the two wars by surrealists such as Gellu Naum, Gherasim Luca, Trost, Paul Păun, etc. A resounding and terrible iconoclastic endeavour is represented by Eugen Ionescu’s book *Nu (No)* (1934), where the young author criticises, among others, writers like Arghezi, Barbu, first-rank aesthetic creators, great experimenters, innovative authors, especially the poet of the

Fitting Words, as far as the Romanian poetic language is concerned. It was a bright, mostly gratuitous critical exercise, a game of critical intelligence, for which the book was even awarded a prize, in the “young unpublished writers” category. Such movements and attitudes managed to bring a breath of innovating and avant-garde air in Romanian literature, with a considerable amount of manifestos and arts of poetry, but also with literary works proper. Thus, Romanian literature is not trapped in stale approaches, pledged to tradition, it is not dominated by inertia and a lack of reaction before the commandments of the new, but rather it defines itself as a dynamic place where ideas and aesthetic forms develop.

The Separation from Tradition

As regards the young authors on their way to asserting themselves at the beginning of the Second World War, their protest movement is a somewhat natural moment in these circumstances, which continues the rebellion and the desire to break with tradition, attesting the vitality of the literary spirit, objectified in countless metamorphoses. An aggravating circumstance of this movement is represented by the war, which amplifies the state of crisis and asserts the imperative need for change. The stalemates of history generate great mobilisation and insurrections of spirit, as forms of expressing inner tension and the crisis of the individual looking for a new spiritual identity. Let us not forget that the German expressionism formed before the First World War began, Dadaism was born during the war, and the Romanian avant-garde appeared at the end of it. Following the course of history, American postmodernism emerged in the ‘50s, after the Second World War and during the Korean War, against a severe crisis of society and of the individual, who felt the need to express themselves, to assert their identity in a world torn apart by crisis, to break with the past and the future at the same time. The discovery of new forms of expression is based, in such cases, on the violent denial of certain mindsets and on asserting the right to spiritual existence under new aesthetic and stylistic auspices. In the case of the rupture movement started by the youth of the “war generation,” the strong desire for assertion, age, the historic context and a certain model shaped by the tradition of protest in Romanian literature, which was already active in the surrealist poets of the time, are what determine their spiritual turmoil, their rebellion, the rage of their denial, the gesture of denouncing “anachronic” mindsets because of a necessity and an urgency: renewing literature, particularly poetry.

On an aesthetic level, the phenomenon of this separation proclaimed through aggressive rhetoric, verging on the Messianic, manifests itself by creating a type of polemic poetry, some sort of *antipoetry*, as compared to traditional, correct, academic poetry, which young authors criticise in their frantic desire to assert themselves. Their poetry breaks literary moulds and conventions, it defies the reader’s expectations, it offends the aesthetic “common sense,” it promotes prosaic elements at the level of discourse and rhetoric, it makes use of common, neutral terms from the daily language or recovers the marginal, argotic lexis, it projects the poetic self in ordinary stances, lacking any kind of lyrical glory. These poets “desecrate” poetry, bring it to the streets, to the derisory common existence, they turn it into an act of protest, of interrogation, of accusation, into a means of propaganda, into a manifesto or a weapon, into a simple, essential way of living. The poetic discourse usually uses instruments that are atypical for “serious” poetry, which have a destructive potential: irony, cynicism, sarcasm, parody, in small or large areas. Sometimes, when these are cultivated

intensely and they get out of control, they become a manner and they project an artificial shadow over the “natural” language of the new poetry. It is this generation’s way of breaking with a literary tradition and, above all, with a mindset that proves its “sufficiency” and “incapacity” before the critical times for history and men.

In a poem written in 1941, *An illusion-maker’s death* (*La moartea unui fabricant de iluzii*)¹, Geo Dumitrescu heralds the imminent death of the century, which he faults through a series of disapproving epithets: “rotten,” “braggart,” “perfidious,” “ruthless,” “stupid,” “anachronic,” “obsolete,” “histrionic.” It is a metaphorical manner, tinged with the poet’s stylistics of irony and sarcasm, of calling for the necessity of the end of an era, for the death of a historically and humanly failed time. The poem evolves in a prosaic manner, with no aesthetic preoccupations, and manages to sound persuasive. Beyond the accusing meaning of a new age manifesto calling for the urgency of historic change, beyond its ideological meaning, the poem carries the psychological and stylistic data of the author’s polemic approach to “aesthetic” poetry, and it is, implicitly, a poetic manifesto, an exemplary text for the “new poetry.” “My friend the prophet whispered to me one day / that our old and rotten century before its time, / will soon die a pitiful death, / like a barely-perceptible change of season. // Hey you old rascal, you dying century, / you’re dying of your sins now – / not a million cranes will pull you / out of the silent black sepulchres of barbed wire. // Braggart, perfidious, you boasted light and kindness – / someone called you the smartest and most modern; / oh will I laugh at the sight of your hands stained with blood and money / crossed forever on your chest. // No, no, don’t think I still love you, ruthless century, / stupid century of serious and juvenile impulses – / though you taught me how to spell the sonorous and pleasant words / that I like gnawing at like pills day after day. // My friend the prophet actually just said called you / anachronic and rightfully obsolete – / they say you made up all sorts of colourful fragile illusions / and everyone feels you were trying to be sweet. // O, melancholic histrionic century, / you’ll bury a thousand brilliant mints with you, / a thousand wise books, a thousand wilted mystifying hands, / a thousand curses, testimonies, banners and conceited forms. // Damn it, don’t be ridiculous! – my friend the prophet is right – / in the barbed wire time’s aslumber and death reigns supreme – / trivial death: a corpse perished to boredom / a hundred-dollar bill in its hand...”²

¹ Geo Dumitrescu, *The Freedom to Shoot a Rifle* (*Libertatea de a trage cu pușca*), The Royal Foundation for Literature and Arts, Bucharest, 1946

² „Prietenul meu proorocul mi-a spus discret într-o zi / că veacul nostru bătrân și putred înainte de timp, / va muri lamentabil în curând, pe nesimțite, / ca o simplă trecere de anotimp. // Hei hoțoman bătrân, veacule muribund, / ai isprăvit prin a pieri de păcatele tale – / din cavouri tăcute și negre de sârmă ghimpată / nu te vor scoate o mie de mii de macarale. // Fanfaron, perfid, te laudai cu lumină și generozitate – / cineva spunea că ești cel mai modern și cel mai deștept; / ce-am să râd când oi vedea mâinile tale murdare de bani și de sânge / definitiv încrucișate pe piept. // Nu, nu, să nu crezi că te mai iubesc veac nemilos, / veac stupid al tuturor elanurilor grave și puerile – / cu toate că tu m-ai învățat să silabisesc cuvintele sonore și agreabile / pe care-mi place să le ronțai zilnic ca pe niște pastile. // Dealtfel, prietenul meu proorocul mi-a spus acum / că tu ești anacronic și pe bună dreptate desuet – / se zice că ai inventat tot felul de iluzii prea colorate și prea fragile / și toată lumea are impresia că ai fost și puțin cochet. // O, veac melancolic și cabotin, / vei duce în groapa ta o mie de minți enorme, / o mie de cărți înțelepte, o mie de mâini misterioase și veștede, / o mie de blesteme, decaloguri, drapele și vanitoase forme. // La dracu, să nu fim patetici! – prietenul meu proorocul are dreptate – / în sârma ghimpată timpul doarme și moartea e stăpână – / deces banal: un cadavru a încetat din viață din plictiseală / cu o hârtie de o sută de dolari în mână...”

Atrocious images of the war, seen through the frightened eyes of the fighter, emerge in the poem *The nail plantation (Plantația de cuie)*³ written by Constant Tonegaru. It is a cruel, naturalistic image, nightmarish and debunking at times, which focuses on death and suffering in a realm of the absurd. The cruelty and representation and the rough stylistics are the poet's polemic way of pleading for a return to the truth and for a type of poetry able to express it, without the sheen of aestheticizing trends: "Like hands with shorn fingers, / twice twisted under the skylight, / in black, autumnal hands, / trees begged to be uprooted / by the Great Warden. // I was waiting – / waiting to see what might happen / in these solitary place. / White bone, I said – / stop beating underneath my left ribs; / soon you'll enter through my temples, round like a bullet. // I'm looking for the corporal now on the field – / ... is he breathing or not, is he dead? / Soon it'll be time to charge at the bastion. / When I return, and if I do, / melt my snow-white hair with a match, / instead of casting spells that use wolf's hairs. // On the grand piano in the parlour / we'd split tin soldiers in two armies / and melted the defeated over the cooking lamp / by the mirror adorned with gloomy angels over coloured seas. // (...) Ten steps away the corporal / would honk its gall bladder / protruding from its stomach, green and flabby, / to call his crushed patrol to charge. // Then he lied back like in a stall / and his voice broke and he fell silent. / Earth rose under his fingernails / and his arms throbbed paddling over a river of pitch. // The Scylla chimera then emerged / and halted on the bloody Moon / like a forgotten liver on a string / and clutched it in its claws. // A lamplighter lit the spook's eyes / as it polished its metal beak flying over trenches."⁴

Victor Tornyopol's poem *The last march (Ultimul marș)*⁵, written in 1943, reveals images of suffering, death and destruction during the hellish war. The expressionist lines and even some visual images are strangely similar to some from Caraion's poems. Let us remember that poetry's return to authentic life is one of the commandments of the new poetry proclaimed by the manifesto-like articles written by Caraion, which contain a spirit of the age that is common to the majority of young writers. The poem in question is a sample of "authenticity," filtered, however, through literary stylisation, and it makes a difference due to the violence of the poetic vision and the strength of the message devoid of any aesthetic complications: "Our veins coated in footprints / head towards the lead-filled fountains, / in our skulls, a dove stopped / to drink the supply of a peaceful march / and to pick poisonous mushrooms / from the ribcage of Constant the private. // (The newspapers wrote of us / that we held tight to our machine guns / that our names should be sacred.) // Oh, if only you knew

³ Constant Tonegaru, *Plantations (Plantații)*, The Royal Foundation for Literature and Arts, 1945

⁴ „Ca niște mâini cu degetele tunse, / de două ori răsucite sub o lucarnă din cer, / în palme negre, tomnatice, / pomii cerșeau desrădăcinarea / de la Marele Temnicer. // Așteptam – / așteptam să văd ce-o să se întâmple / prin regiunile astea singuratiche. / „Os alb, spuneam – / nu mai bate în stânga sub ultima coastă; / azi-mâine, rotund de plumb vei intra pe la tample. // Caut acum pe domnul caporal pe platou – / ... răsufală, nu răsufală, a murit? / Azi-mâine, se face ora să dăm atac la bastion. / Când mă voi întoarce, dacă mă voi întoarce, / în contra fricei în loc să descântați cu păr de lup / zăpada părului meu s-o topiți la chibrit. // Mai de mult pe coada pianului din salon / împărțeam soldații de plumb în două armate / și topeam pe învinși la mașina de spirt / lângă oglinda cu îngeri dezolați deasupra apelor colorate. // (...) La zece pași de mine domnul caporal / își clacsona prelung cu pompa biliară / ce-i atârna din pântec, verde, afară, / patrula nimicită la asalt. // Se liniști apoi pe spate ca-ntr-un stal / în glasul lui rupându-se o stambă. / Pământul i se urca sub unghii / și brațele svâcneau vâslitul unei gropi cu smolă. // Himera Scylla țâșni din ea / făcând escală cu ghiarele înfipte între ghimpi / pe Luna ca un ficat însângerat / rămas acolo pe rețea. // Un lampagiu aprinse privirea fantasmei care rar / peste tranșee lustruia sătulă pliscul de metal.”

⁵ Victor Tornyopol, *The Book of Blood, Bread and Coke (Cartea cu sânge, pâine și cocs)*, Forum, 1945

that we drank the muck / and got mold in our chests / and that we trembled face down on the ground / waiting for bullets to shatter our jaws. // We've cursed you all at home; / you never even sent us smokes / you didn't know pain and grit took root inside ourselves / and cold pricked at our hands and waists. // We were young and didn't wish to die / but then headlights swept away our lives / our comrades' boots stepped over our necks / and our hands then wouldn't shoot."⁶

However, suffering and death also contain hopes for rebirth. In the ashes of war there are the seeds of new life, of a new love waiting to grow stronger, more passionate than before. Alexandru Lungu, one of the poets of this generation, makes a plea for life in the poem *War endless bloodshed (Răsboiul hemoragie imensă)*⁷: "Our love will be stronger more feverish more bustling / because my bloodshot eyes / met you one clear day / clear like a crystal ball / because my ears / tormented by the evil music of war / heard your low voice / vibrating like a consolation – / our life will be different / from that of anaemic heroes of some novel / because we learned / by the tragic lesson of war / that life needs to be lived / a thousand times more intensely / than our parents lived / that life can't be left to flow / like water like smoke / through your fingers – / yes, we will love a thousand times harder / precisely because we'll wear / in the concealed folds of our heart / the memory of this war like no other / like endless bloodshed / like a tremendous fire..."⁸

A "Theorist" of the New Poetry

Outlining the coordinates of this "new literature" in the articles he wrote in the press, Caraion sets up the aesthetic and psychological grounds for his poetry, in a sort of conceptual and ideological approach, through which he offers, at least in part, the keys to its reception. The author continues to promote his ideas regarding the renewing of literature, an ideal which inspires the members of his generation, in a number of poems with explicit elements of poetics (*Antreul poemului*⁹, *Cântece negre*¹⁰, *Caseta cu inimi de fosfor*¹¹). This poetics is then spread to the entirety of his creation, which, in a series of lyrical metamorphoses, expresses a particular vision of poetry and its functions and meanings. The manifesto poems advance (reiterate and develop in a lyrical reading) the ideas of an aesthetics that would become more

⁶ „Arterele noastre pline de urme de picioare / se-ndreaptă spre fântânile cu plumb, / din craniile noastre, s-a oprit un golumb / să bea provizia unui marș necombatant / și să culeagă din toracele soldatului Constant / câteva ciuperce otrăvitoare. // (În țară, gazetele scriau despre noi / că n-am lăsat din mâini mitraliera / că numele nostru e sfânt.) // O, dacă ați ști cum am supt din mocirlă / puțină igrasie pentru piept / și cum am tremurat cu pumnii-n pământ / așteptând să ne spargă cartușele gura. // V-am blestemat pe voi, cei de-acasă / că nu ne-ați trimis măcar un pachet de țigări / că nu știți cum ne crește-n stomac durerea și zgura / și cum ne plivește frigul mâinile și centura. // Am fost tineri și nu am vrut să murim / dar într-o noapte farurile ne-au măturat viața / bocancii camarazilor ne-au călcat grumazul / și palmele care n-au mai vrut să mai tragă.”

⁷ Alexandru Lungu, *The 25th Hour (Ora 25)*, Publicom Imprint, Bucharest, 1946

⁸ „Ne vom iubi mai profund mai agitat mai febril / pentru că privirile mele stropite cu sânge / te-au întâlnit într-o zi clară / ca o sferă de cristal, / pentru că urechile mele / hărțuite de muzica nefastă a războiului / ți-au auzit vocea gravă / vibrând ca o consolare – / ne vom iubi altfel / decât eroii anemici ai cine știe cărui roman / pentru că am învățat / prin lecția tragică a războiului / că viața trebuie trăită / de o mie de ori mai puternic / decât au trăit-o părinții noștri / că viața nu trebuie lăsată să fugă / ca o apă ca un fum / printre degete – / da, ne vom iubi de o mie de ori mai puternic / tocmai pentru că vom purta / în cutele ascunse ale inimii / amintirea acestui războiu / cum n-a mai fost cum n-o să mai fie altul / ca o hemoragie imensă / ca un incendiu colosal...”

⁹ *The antechamber of the poem*

¹⁰ *Black songs*

¹¹ *The casket with phosphorous hearts*

and more defined and objectified at the level of his poetic vision and expression. In the case of Caraion (but not only), poetry transcends, at least during one of its phases, the condition of gratuitous aesthetic act and borrows the function of the ideological manifesto, becoming, by itself, an act of revolt and indignation, a gesture of insurgence, a proclamation of severance from the previous reality and of the need for change. Later on, it will become an observation chart of his own self in relation to a world engulfed in absurdity and chaos, a cry of desperation, a refuge from the decay of existence, a means for salvation. The break from tradition that Ion Caraion and his generation of rebellious poets defiantly and resoundingly profess refers to the aesthetic mentality, but also, implicitly, to the philosophy and stylistics of existence. The new poetry is born out of the energies of hatred and rebellion, out of the desire to tear everything down and to destroy, out of the rejection of anachronistic and sterile (in the view of the literary insurgents) aesthetics, which falsify existence instead of expressing it, on a foundation based more on psychology than aesthetics. The new "programme" is composed of an amalgam of literary attitudes and choices, all of them subordinate to the supreme principles of authenticity and the prosaic, in a movement defined by an universal contempt for tradition and its fixations, and by defiance shown towards the "bourgeois" literature. Defining elements of its alchemy include: rebellion, the dismissal of the excessively formal approach to writing poetry and of the belief in its sacred nature, the prosaic, the everyday reality, naturalism, the aesthetic of the ugly, the non-poetic ("my dark and ugly poetry", as Caraion calls it in one of his writings), the rough emotion, the protest, the militant spirit, the rejection of the intellectualized philistinism, the closure of the gap between the poet and the masses, the abolition of the great themes of the poetical tradition, the marginal, the drab, the sordid, the unsavoriness, and more.

Conclusions

The spirit of rebellion of the war generation's poets is objectified, both conceptually and aesthetically, in the programmatic articles published in the press, and in their poetry. In the articles (especially those signed by Geo Dumitrescu and Ion Caraion), with their air of manifesto-texts, a new vision of poetry, a new ideology and a new aesthetic are expressed. It is rather an antipoetic aesthetic, an antiaesthetic, which the new poetry is built upon. On the other hand, the poetry of these authors apply, more or less, the aesthetic vision revealed in the programmatic articles. The poems of this era of literary rupture from the tradition are emblematic examples, some of them remarkable, of the "new poetry". There is a common air in the poems written by the poets that make up this generation, indeed, one that is "lost" in an absurd history. All of them express the rebellion against a disabused world reaching its twilight, living its end, because of its own incapacity, against a time "out of joint." The war is the existential framework, prolific from a literary perspective, where the new poetry develops. Beyond the thematic world, this poetry asserts its identity on an aesthetic level, by breaking with the established forms and with the aesthetic canons of the age. This affirmation occurs either explicitly, in manifesto poems of a programmatic nature, or implicitly, in the poetic vision and style. The aesthetic revolution begun by the war generation will be interrupted yet by the events of history. However, despite the times and literary destinies, the "new poetry" will not remain without any echo in Romanian postwar poetry.

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