

The Albatross Generation – A New Avant-garde

Loredana Opăriuc (căs. Cuzmici)

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Key-words: avant-garde, antimodernism, postmodernism, totalitarianism, ideology, subversive literature, committed literature, anti-literature, Romanian post-war literature

Abstract

In the broader context of the war generation, the group of writers coalesced around the *Albatross* magazine, published in 1941 only 7 numbers, are distinguished by several aspects which place them on the interwar avant-garde traces (negativity, insurgency, experiment, etc.) and some other elements specific to an era marked by a socio-political crisis: the ideologization of literature, anti-literary seepage, the recovery of mimesis. We are dealing with a moderate vanguard, with some less angry young people as compared to the interwar generation, for whom tradition is not only burdensome ballast causing "the anxiety of influence", but also a consistent source of intertextual dialogue.

The first circle of the Albatross group (with the same meaning of the phrase employed by Solzhenitsyn) consists of permanent editors, with subsequent important publications for the Romanian literature - Geo Dumitrescu, Dinu Pillat, Virgil Ierunca, Ben. Corlaci, Marin Sarbulescu - and of those who financially and administratively facilitated the printing of the publication: Sergiu Filerot, Mircea Streinul. The destiny of these authors is representative for the whole generation who wrote under various dictatorships: creative freedom was replaced by censorship, prohibition, exile, imprisonment. Having Baudelaire, Panait Istrati and G. Călinescu as proclaimed cultural models, the first circle of the *Albatross* enters the literary scene under the mark of an aesthetic heteronomy which they will cultivate in one form or another throughout their entire existence: the writer literally descends in the city, but the city is becoming a repressive context for most.

A recovering vanguard is also traceable in this generation in a sense that there is a partial healing to the mistrust in tradition and in the eccentricities without aesthetic purpose, a vanguard that foresees the seeds of postmodernism as the age of cultural recovery. Instead, suspicion - using, of course, Nathalie Sarraute's famous term - extends

to literature itself, the writers already witnessing the “last days” of its life, or at least having a feeling of the end of literature grafted on “the end of history”. Similarities to the interwar avant-garde can be also drawn, in Nicolae Manolescu’s manner, when it comes to the interpretation of the writers ”in pairs”: Geo Dumitrescu - Geo Bogza (prosaic virulence, language descended from pedestals, glowing reportages in the era of adhesion); Emil Ivănescu-Urmuz (denouncing the excessive conventionalizing of literature, the cruelty of authenticity) and, when it comes to literary ingenuity – Emil Ivănescu - Victor Valeriu Martinescu; Mircea Streinul - Ion Vinea (the typology of the “lunatics”, the eccentrics, the fascination of death, the epic embryos developed in twin constructions, the aestheticism blended with the harsh realism, traditional reminiscences, the elegiac lyricism), Alexander Vona - M. Blecher (prose imponderables, the disintegration of epic and character) etc. Similarly, parallels can be drawn to subsequent generations (Geo Dumitrescu - Marin Sorescu - Mircea Dinescu; Emil Ivănescu - Mircea Ivănescu) precisely because we are dealing with a generation of transition from modernism, avant-garde to neomodernism - postmodernism, as critics often argued.

The authors of the original group cover all layers of literature: the “depoetized” poetry by Geo Dumitrescu, the “combatant” one by Sergiu Filerot, critical thinking exemplified by Virgil Ierunca and Dinu Pillat, the analytical prose with existentialist modulations – by Mircea Streinul and Dinu Pillat, the parodic prose - Marin Sârbulescu etc. Concepts such as post-vanguard (used by Constantin Pricop in *Romanian Postwar Literature. Preliminaries*) and anti-modernism (explained by Compagnon) provide a suitable conceptual framework beyond the relativity of the prefixes employed. Also, Virgil Nemoianu’s “secondary” can find plenty of exemplifications in the destiny and writings of the albatrossists.

The chapter “The Revolutionary and The Reactionary” takes into account the ideological aspect of the generation because left or right options (with the inescapable retractions) influenced writings to a certain extent. Sergiu Filerot can be considered a genuine proletkult poet, one of the few in the Romanian literature, whose poems collected under the title *Man* sent him behind bars during the Antonescu regime and even sentenced him to death (the sentence was later commuted to sending into the frontline). Mircea Streinul remains the reactionary par excellence in the group, a self-proclaimed

legionnaire nourished by the German thinking, whose works were kept in the secret library fund for over 40 years. His status as a Bukovina refugee in the Kingdom due to the Bolshevik invasion benefited his political situation and his work, on the trail of a Gothic neo-romanticism with existentialist infusions, also reflects the drama of the amputated Romania, which was the main cause of their prohibition in the communist period.

Ben. Corlaci is an author whose literary trajectory seems to capture all the abnormal metamorphoses of the postwar Romanian history. From the juvenile Legionnaire of the war period, he moves pretty fast to the communist enthusiasm and he writes more propaganda prose in the socialist realism decades and gradually introduces subversive allusions to the socio-political context that will eventually turn his poetry into an anti-system one (which will result in exile). Besides, the most aesthetically-valued part of his work remains the literature of revolt, political poetry being avoided in all the reviews on the author, including the most recent ones.

The most mentioned personality from the magazine remains Geo Dumitrescu. Ostentatiously cultivating the transitive poetry, following in the footsteps of Bacovia and of the insurgent vanguard, he reaches, in his turn, “under the times” with a journalistic activity which supports the communist regime, traceable in subsequent volumes of poetry. A certain moment of “awakening” can also be detected in subversive poems meant to denounce by means of allusion and parody the aberrations of a totalitarian regime. With plenty emulators, especially in the 80s Generation, his work is distinguished especially by the aporetic poetry under the anti-literature sign.

The next writer whose career is connected to the *Albatross* magazine is Virgil Ierunca, famous mainly for his work at Radio Free Europe. Ardent follower of the left during the war and in the first two years after Romania changed sides, he finally comprehends the dangers and chooses exile. His entire work fits into the category of committed literature: he fights against communism through journalism, through radio broadcasts, through books aimed at denouncing the horrors behind the Iron Curtain. His journal and poems contain numerous anti-literary reflections: in a very difficult socio-political context, literature is stripped of its artificial limits (“history swallowed metaphysics and poetry” diagnosed the author).

Dinu Pillat, novelist and literary critic, falls into the pattern of the generation not only due to his biography, but also due to the general theme of his writings: the dispute between life and books. We are dealing, therefore, with novels about cultural and ideological de-formation, the bovarism of his characters acquiring a dangerous concreteness, in the lines of Dostoevsky's prose. The problematic authenticity with existentialist tones is found in *Everyday Death*, one of the few Romanian novels of the era which bears traces of the absurd.

The last writer scrutinized in the present work, Marin Sârbulescu, deserves the reevaluation of literary critics especially due to his only volume of prose published posthumously: *Through Fire and Flame*. Protected by the coat of minority - the author labeled them as sketches – the writings gathered between these covers are a sample of subversive literature of the highest quality, with recognizable textual patterns, ranging from Caragiale and Chekhov, to Gogol and Kafka. The allusion, pastiche and parody are the main means by which Sârbulescu depicts the condition of the writer under dictatorship and the obedient uniformity of human beings in a totalitarian regime.

The works of the authors of the *Albatross*' first circle are, therefore, representative of the entire postwar Romanian literature, reflecting in the multiple ways the pressure of the context on creation.