

VORONCA BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Voronca's artistic thinking follows a significant trajectory for the evolution of poetry in the 20th century, recording its main metamorphoses, from the shattering anarchism of the "modernist" beginnings, until the time when the avant-garde, which was later recuperated by literary history, of course, took its place in the museum of literature. Beyond the esthetic and political bias, which he enthusiastically adhered to, the Romanian poet offered an example of a rare constancy in his conception on poetry, which escapes definitions and discourages critical analysis.

Voronca's theoretical thinking – concentrated over the Romanian period of his activity – is in a permanent state of osmosis with his poetry, as both use the same ideas and images to illustrate the same arguments. Despite the adamant manifesto – which planned to be incendiary – and in spite of his violent tone, his approach is still that of any poet who wonders about the nature of poetry, searching for and proposing solutions seeking to rejuvenate lyricism. His thoughts about art, which took a concrete shape in the articles published in avant-garde magazines and later gathered in a book (*The Second Light*, 1930, including most texts published between 1925 and 1929 in *Unu* and in *Integral*), or directly published in a book (*Putting In an Appearance*, 1932), continue in the articles published in 1935 in the *Adevarul* daily. These theoretical writings were published by Ion Pop under the title *Putting In an Appearance*, Dacia Publishing House, 1972. This work, that all ensuing quotation are taken from, re-published several texts that were printed between 1924 and 1930.

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Voronca begins by saying that his adherence to the avant-garde is the result of an objective need to respond to the "spirit of the time," not to the requirements of a generalized revolution. His arguments are psychological, intellectual and moral, never political, as the poet was not one of those who mistook freedom for revolution. It was in the name of this indispensable synchronization that he made it his duty to attack literary tradition and to exalt modern life, as far as it represents a break from the past; the dynamism of this century, already affirmed as a major value by the futurists, is vividly illustrated in an outburst of enthusiasm: this can be seen at text level in the chaotic juxtaposition of words that suggest a technical and scientific universe (cf. "Planegram," *op. cit.*, p. 183).

Beyond the vertigo of words that refuse all metaphor, in order to tune in to the very rhythm of modern life, it is obvious there is a nostalgia for grand spaces; either as a cosmopolitan striving of the avant-garde or as a haunting idea of traveling, which was already one of the obsessions of the 20th century, this theme re-established the contact with the poetic tradition of the pre-

ceding century. The invasion of indecency into the poem-manifesto does not ban the text from the realm of literature, the result being rather the poeticizing – without any legitimate doubt – of the modern material. Of course, many texts by Voronca have more to do with pathetic lyricism than with any adroit manipulation of ideas, suggesting a poem, rather than a manifesto; the purely theoretical approach is, however, far from being absent.

The achievements of the past are brushed away with one stroke of the pen, with sovereign contempt (“grammar logic feelings like/clothes pins/on ropes,” *ibid.*), but this is done in awareness of the relativity of things. Because even when “creation in art completely ignores logic,” the poet is far from eulogizing the illogical, conscious that the “illogical logic” will become in its turn the dominant logic, once it is accepted by all (cf. “Grammar”, *op. cit.*, p. 194 ff.). The main characteristic trait of the century, according to Voronca, is not a negation of values, but a synthesis that all arts that converge on “in an abstract accord.” (cf. “Voices”, *op. cit.*, p. 199); this way cubism, futurism, constructivism have begotten synthetic art. The Romanian theoretician does not ascribe much importance to surrealism, quoted in passing as a “late reiteration on a Freudian foundation of the Zurich achievements,” *ibid.*)

The various currents of the avant-garde have always proven to be intolerant enough, excluding each other, often for reasons of personal antagonism. Unlike other “modernist” spokesmen, who are so prominent in their narrow-minded exclusionism and in their absurd intolerance (going even against the very principle of freedom), Voronca proves to be a moderate, retaining something of each “ism”. We must emphasize that Romania received almost contemporaneously the impact of all movements which made up the avant-garde, so Romanians were able to make choices inside a continuous artistic current, seen as a conglomerate of often identical ideas and tendencies.

So, as far as Voronca is concerned, the unitary spirit of the epoch is paralleled by a kind unitary art – synthetic art, which is dealt with in “Grammar” (*supra*). Inside the system of arts there is a subtle dynamic, which allows for the transformation of the constituent elements and ensures their cohesion. According to the Romanian theoretician, an evolution is visible, which, starting out from cubist research, ends up in the “style of the epoch”: constructivism (cf. *Architecture, op. cit.*, p. 203). Voronca is right to notice that cubist painting is superior to cubist literature from the standpoint of the audacity of research, because Picasso and Braque are much more courageous than Salmon, Jacob, or even Appolinaire. But to him, cubism, purism and futurism are primarily currents in the realm of painting; only with the coming of dadaism, the first cult that was not just an artistic attitude, did a general ideology emerge. Out of the rivalry between cubism and dadaism, Voronca sees the birth of the “expression of the century,” namely constructivism.

Surrealism is analyzed even further, with the avowed intention of proving the superiority of integralism (another name for synthetism) over the current

that had just come up with its first manifesto in 1924. In "Surrealism and Integralism" (*op. cit.* p. 206 ff.) Voronca expresses his reservations; in his view, surrealism brought nothing new to the preceding currents. As far as doctrine is concerned, it was nothing but "a tardy return to a source of the past": its emphasis on hallucination and dream and its excessive disintegration belong to expressionism, which, in its turn, reiterated "the nasal Romantic complaints." The basic error of the current launched by André Breton is allegedly that Freud's theories were placed at the foundation of art. The unconscious has always been deeply explored by creators, because it is the very matter of art. In terms of actual creation, surrealism proposes nothing new and does nothing else than take up again the dadaist research. But "surrealism is, when analyzed, feminine expressionism," while dadaism is masculine. To Voronca, integralism most certainly responds best to the requirements of being modern: "Not the sick Romantic surrealistic disintegration, but order as synthesis, order as constructive, classical, integral essence." This plea for order, which is surprising with a promoter of the avant-garde, is, however, justified in its context: it has to help integralism, the "most abstract, the purest" message, get across.

At a time when poets claimed to do other things than poetry, the debate about creation gave impetus to all passions, in the absence of all preoccupation with any form related to structure. The "modernists" focused on the poetic image and on the word, to probe into its depths. More often than not, the results of this esthetic, pseudo-philosophical research are nothing but theoretical developments whose conclusions are debatable to say the least, hesitating between esoterica and gratuitous lyrical outbursts. On this slippery ground of speculation, Voronca succeeds in staying in the mainstream, despite individual exaggerations that his argumentation, fuzzy in some places, is strewn with. To him, words acquire meaning, "fighting or embracing each other" ("Grammar", *op. cit.*, p. 194). Of course, this is the futurist conception of "words at liberty," reiterated by dadaism and surrealism. Rimbaud and Mallarmé are mentioned as the first to have researched "the word, taken as such," but, according to Voronca, Marinetti and the dadaists (Picabia, Tzara, Schwitters) were the first to succeed completely. Without giving in to the temptation of the esoterica – unlike the surrealists who made it an essential point of their doctrine – the Romanian poet only mentions Nostradamus and his capacity to make surprising combinations of words in passing (*ibid.* p. 195). The resulting obscurity is raised to the rank of artistic value, because the comprehension of art implies an effort, as art that is readily accessible is not worthy of this name. (cf. "Voices," *op. cit.*, p. 199 ff.).

Often it seems that Voronca endorses the avant-garde because the spirit of the epoch imposed it, and that he considered it his duty to support progress on a general basis. Sometimes it is surprising to discover the extent to which he is still tied to a tradition so strongly attacked elsewhere, and his case is far from being singular among Romanian "modernists."

Unlike other European avant-garde movements, the Romanian avant-garde never breaks with the cult of the “national poet,” Eminescu. True, certain details of the Moldavian poet’s life make it easy to assimilate him with rebels sidelined by society, a situation that only served to create sympathy for him among the “modernists.” On the other hand, Eminescu represents the Poet to such a degree, that any attack against him seemed unthinkable, an absurd violation of the very principle of Poetry. As to the poetic form proper, Voronca quotes verses by Eminescu where he finds the modern effort of turning the elements of the poem into “abstractions” (cf. “About Poem and Anthology,” *op. cit.*, p. 52 ff.). Tudor Arghezi is another poet Voronca admires without reservation – endorsing an opinion largely shared by the “modernist” circles (cf. “Tudor Arghezi,” *op. cit.*, p. 211 ff.): Arghezi was a complex personality, a creator to whom the tradition/innovation difference was not operative. Inside the same kind of logic, Voronca eulogizes the Romanian folk poetry, a true source for the avant-garde, owing to its technique of associating ideas and to the abstract character of the image (cf. “About the Integral,” *op. cit.*, p. 39 ff.). So, Romanian literature is thought to be able by its very essence to beget modernism from the inside, without any foreign imports. Voronca asserts very firmly that Romanian modernism is “a spontaneous buoyancy, its character being profoundly Romanian, despite supra-national appearances” (*ibid.*). Then follows a surprising eulogy of the Romanian language, considered as the most able to translate the modern sensitivity. The rejection of the French influence – which is a constant feature of Voronca’s view – pushes him into mocking “the desire of all Romanian writers to be translated into, and quoted in, French. Why not Coptic or Annamite?” (“The Second Light,” *op. cit.*, p. 29.)

The Romanian avant-garde has always been aware of its independence, or perhaps of its precedence within the European movement, due to the activity of Tristan Tzara, nationally and internationally, and to the existence of this mythical being, Urmuz. That reality stresses again the complexity of the relationship between tradition and innovation – a new version of the quarrel between “traditionalists and moderns,” which goes beyond the borders of one particular country and becomes part of the international context.

Voronca never contests the existence of a necessary continuity in art (cf. “The New Poetry,” *op. cit.*, p. 47 ff.), because the raw material of poetry has to stay the same; what changes is its interpretation. From this, a paradoxical conclusion is drawn for a “modernist,” who opposes the ideology of his time and singles out this poet among his contemporaries: “In fact, in art, as everywhere else, in society for instance, we must rule out revolution” (*ibid.*).

As far as the poet’s political and social commitment is concerned, Voronca feels – in this stage of the evolution of his thinking – that he has to stay away (cf. “The Second Light,” *op. cit.*, p. 29), because making a commitment means to give up freedom and to “be caught in the straight jacket of utility formulas” (*ibid.*). At a time when the avant-garde taught social mili-

tancy and the participation of all people in the artistic creation, the Romanian poet acts differently, refusing to refer to "the number and comprehension of the flock"; to him, the poetic act has to stay "gratuitous and sublime like the rainbow over the forest." This surprising choice seems to have been determined by psychological reasons rather than by political persuasion, namely Voronca's reiterated fear of losing his own identity in the midst of others; the risk is – and the poet is aware of it – to be isolated "on the dry rock of the dream" (another version of the ivory tower?). Even when, later, the desire for human contact becomes an essential trait of his poetry, he never lets go of that obsession.

Loneliness always implies sacrifice, like any ascetic attitude that makes the poet able to evolve in terms of eternity: "To be included in the calendar of martyrs, you must totally abandon your own self. It is impossible to cheat eternity, the invisible. A risk, total adventure" (*ibid.*). In such assertions the encounter between Romanticism and "modernism" becomes very visible; the relationship between the two "states of mind" goes further and it is worth studying in-depth.

Faced with the relativity of a world where any claim to find a definitive solution proves ridiculous, where there is no certitude, the poem remains the only pillar of support. And Voronca is at the same time too realistic and too honest not to admit that the force of his generation is to be "found most of all in the single morality and religion of the poem" (*ibid.*). Elsewhere (cf. "The Chalk Cheek," *op. cit.*, p. 129 ff.), he demolishes the vanity of claiming to do "something else" than literature and tries to bestow nobility back upon art. It is not only an obvious position in favor of esthetics, but an actual philosophical creed. The awareness of the relativity of things is in open contradiction with the very need for manifestos, with the claim to express the truth and, implicitly, to offer unique recipes for creation. Far from the scientific claim of surrealism, Voronca is content to say people reach poetry by "a deviation from thinking by way of the word, by slipping into a milky way of images" ("Between Me and Me," *op. cit.*, p. 80). The ambition to write down the inner truth is vain, because the states of mind are infinite and writing is nothing but approximation: "Of course, between what goes on inside of us and the fragmentary echo of the words there is a difference of voltage, an insufficiency of the aorta" (*ibid.*). Expression cannot render the inner truth, and this is an implicit criticism of the surrealistic procedures, namely the description of dreams and the automatic writing: these two claimed scientific truth, as they considered their results documents attesting the way the subconscious works.

Voronca notices that even words are combined according to the laws of hazard – the dadaist recipe taken up by the surrealists – as the elements of a poem are limited in number; so, humans can only associate them, one way or another; each new association is immediately included and made subject to rules, as one formula replaces another: "My claim is to do away with for-

mulas, and this assertion becomes a formula" (*ibid.*). The poet appears in this conception as a new Sisyphus, the symbol of human grandeur and of the tragic efforts made by man, always bordering on nothingness. In the footsteps of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, aware that in order to "maintain an equilibrium of pure azure," he should give up writing altogether, Voronca finds himself a prisoner of immobility: "I'd like perpetual movement, I wish no new formula would become established, but that's impossible!" (*ibid.*). This lucidity is rare among the major theoreticians of the Romanian avant-garde; he is aware of the limits posed by knowledge and invention, reaches his conclusions following deep thought, far from the preconceived ideas and intellectual habits of his time, a total stranger to exclusionism and intolerance.

Voronca's case is typical of most Romanian members of the avant-garde movement, highly educated intellectuals, practicing the cult of poetry and of art in general. Uncomfortable enough when they operate with negative categories (despite the sincerity of their approach), they demolish in order to build better, because it is only in building that they offer the full measure of their talent. Their adherence to a principle of "modernism," which they prefer to call constructivism, synthetism, or integralism, all being "positive" categories, comes from the importance they ascribe to artistic creation in all forms. They quickly put behind them the stage of the break with tradition, to affirm the reality of continuity with the experience of their forerunners. And, in this context, any attempt to explain the emergence of the Romanian avant-garde as a result of foreign influences only, of the European style, would mean to create a totally false vision of reality.

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