

URMUZ (Demetru Demetrescu Buzau, 1883-1923) is another forerunner of the literary avant-garde in Romania. This “guy’s” biography made the avant-garde circles admire him, which is an apparent paradox.

Urmuz spent his life in perfect anonymity. A humble clerk in several small towns and then a clerk of the Bucharest Supreme Court of Appeals, at the age of forty Urmuz killed himself with a bullet, without any apparent reason. Except, perhaps, anxiety. In his spare time he loved to play the piano and listen to music – his hobby. He wrote a few small prose pieces which he loved to read, for fun, to his family. Those little prose pieces made the posthumous glory of Urmuz and triggered the deep admiration of the avant-garde. In 1928, Geo Bogza delivered his eulogy, publishing the *Urmuz* literary magazine and in 1930, Sasa Pana, director of the *Unu* magazine and of the publishing house bearing the same name, published a book with the writings of Urmuz: *Algazy & Grummer*, Bucharest,



mitrie VĂRBĂNESCU (Icewan),
aginary Portrait of Urmuz

Unu. A great number of articles were written about him, all voices unanimously stated Urmuz’ work was the repository of a new sensitivity and of a new style, saying the author was a real leader.

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The prose pieces written by Urmuz before 1910 bring absurdity as novelty, along with a deified man. His approach is based on the confusion between the proper and the figurative meaning of words. It is even possible to say that the figurative level of the language is totally absent. Which is the aesthetic expression of deification: the absence of moral transcendence and the domination of objects are better translated by these procedures. Here is the portrait of a character:

“Ishmael was made up of eyes, whiskers and a robe; he cannot be found today, except with difficulty. Not long ago, he also grew in the Garden of Plants. Since then, owing to the progress of modern science, it has been possible to make one by chemical synthesis.”⁶

In fact, all the portraits of characters are built in this “morpho-mechanic” manner, which makes it possible to closely compare the Romanian writer to the entire imagery of avant-garde painters and sculptors: Picabia, Duchamp, Max Ernst, Brauner, Miro, Dali, Picasso. The collage technique produces surprising effects in literature. One of the traits of the avant-garde, inaugurated by Rimbaud, and which has become the symbol of modern sensitivity, is the tendency to replace reality with its virtuality as subject of the work of art. The imagination of art begins to despise the imagination of nature. The modern reject the *mimesis* principle, considering it too restrictive.

Urmuz’ pages seem to defy an entire literature and tradition of literary conventions. The fragment already quoted continues this way:

“Ishmael never went to take a walk alone. But you could see him, every morning, by five-thirty, pacing in zigzags the Arionoia street, accompanied by a badger he was strongly tied to with a cable. At night, Ishmael tore up that animal’s ears, then he ate it raw and alive, with lemon juice.

Ishmael cultivated a lot of other badgers in a nursery placed at the bottom of a cave, in the province of Dobruja, on the Black Sea shore. There, he fed and raised them; when they were sixteen years old and almost full grown, he dishonored them, one after the other, without any remorse, protected by the Penal Code.”

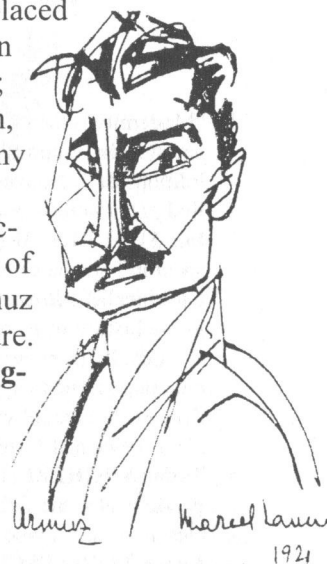
The unfolding action and the behavior of the character deny the logic of the real, strictly following the logic of language. Imitating the normal style and syntax, Urmuz plunges into the absurd and writes a parody of literature.

The prose writings of Urmuz make up together a negative utopia of language.

Although in Urmuz’ writings the images have “the most elevated degree of the arbitrary” (André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, 1924), can we “place” the Romanian writer in line with the surrealists? Eugène Ionesco himself asked the same question:

“Is Urmuz or is he not an authentic surrealist? Is he not, considering his permanent ironic lucidity, a ridiculous character, a spiritual brother of Jarry? Or, else, if we really want to find an involvement here, could we not consider him a more mechanic and grotesque Kafka? The surrealists of Romania claim him as a leader of their school. Anyway, Urmuz is a true prophet of the displacement of forms, of the spirit, and of language, in this world that is disintegrating before our eyes, this absurd world, like the writer’s heroes (...)”

As we do not have any references on Urmuz’ readers, we can only talk about coincidences and affinities, about a spirit or a fashion that was increasingly taking over European literature in the 20th century. If not to establish a relationship, then to at least find the place of the Romanian writer among



the pioneers of the absurd. Urmuz' approach is closer to the writings of Jarry, with their insolence and desire to blow the literary conventions to pieces, than to those of the Czech writer, who uses the traditional means of telling a story to emphasize the absurd side of the human condition.

Translated from French
by Monica VOICULESCU

NOTES

1. "Modernity is the transitory, the furtive, the contingent, the half-art, the other half being the eternal and the immovable." Charles Baudelaire, *L'art romantique* in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, volume IV, 1923, p. 222.
2. *Ibid.*, *De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne*, op. cit., volume V, *Curiosités esthétiques*, 1925, p. 183.
3. **Ion MINULESCU** (1881-1944, Bucharest). Poet, prose writer, playwright. After four years spent in Paris he came back to Bucharest and sided with the modernists in their quarrel with the traditionalists. *Romante pentru mai tarziu* (*Romances for Later*), 1908, was an important event in the history of Romanian literature: novelty of language, irony and self-irony, freedom from prosody. In his poetry he adopted the themes and, most of all, the procedures of symbolism: repetitions, symmetries, preference for certain numbers, the taste for exotic journeys, rare words and rhymes. In charge with symbolism-oriented magazines: *Revista celorlalti* (*The Others' Magazine*), 1908, and *Insula* (*The Island*), 1912.
4. **Tudor ARGHEZI** (1880-1967, Bucharest). One of the most important poets of the 20th century. He is also the father of Eli Lotar (1905-1969), a photographer, close to the avant-garde circles in the west, who worked with Bunuel.
5. **Eugen LOVINESCU** (1881-1943, Bucharest). He wrote, based on the theory of modernism, a *History of Modern Romanian Civilization*, I-III, 1924-1925 and a *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, I-IV, 1926-1929. His comments place literature in the autonomy of aesthetics and in the perspective of what he called "the spirit of the century," *saeculum*, which plays the role both of a generator and of a convergence point for the literary and artistic creation, above individual differences.
6. *Ismaël et Turnavite* (*Ishmael and Turnavite*), translated from Romanian into French by Eugène Ionesco. In Eugène Ionesco, *Précurseurs roumains du surréalisme* (*Romanian Forerunners of Surrealism*), "Urmuz," in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, Paris, January-February, 1965.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Eugène Ionesco, *ibid.*