

1928-1939. NEW PUBLICATIONS • THE MAGAZINE
OF THE *UNU* GROUP • THE CULTURAL
CLIMATE • THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE
UNU YEARS • THE FIRST ROMANIAN
SURREALISM • THE "SUICIDE" OF *UNU*

ALGE AND VIATA IMEDIATA

În 1928-1939 the second stage of the avant-garde movement in Romania developed. Its characteristic trait – a very rich cultural life, along with a definition of the avant-garde spirit in the literary circles of Romania and a better synchronization with the European artistic phenomenon. Those years were marked by the emergence of other literary magazines, as well:

Urmuz, Campina, nos. 1-15, January 1928-July 1928.

Director: Geo Bogza.

Unu (One), Bucharest, nos. 1-50, April 1928-December 1932.

Director: Sasa Pana.

XX-Literatura contemporana (XX-Contemporary Literature), nos. 1-7, December 8, 1928-May 15, 1929.

Director: Aurel Zarembo.

Alge (Sea Weeds), nos. 1-8, September 13-December 25, 1930; nos. 1-3, March 1-May 1, 1933.

Director: Aurel Baranga.

Liceu (High School), Constanta, nos. 1 and 2, August and September, 1932.

Contributor: Tascu Gheorghiu.

Viata imediata (Everyday Life), Bucharest, one issue, December 1933.

Director: Geo Bogza.

Meridian, Craiova, nos. 1-34, May 1, 1934-June 1, 1946.

Director: Tiberiu Iliescu.

Of these, *Unu* is by far the most important. For five years – 1928-1932 – it provided the best means to get artistic information and the most advanced ground for literary and fine arts experiments. The writers that formed a group around this magazine, Sasa Pana, Ilarie Voronca, Stéphane Roll, Geo Bogza,

Mihail Cosma and the painters Victor Brauner, M.H. Maxy, Herold, Perahim, were increasingly influenced by surrealism.

Unu's permanent columns: "Etuva" (*Drying Closet*), "Camasa de forta" (*Straight Jacket*), "Vestiar" (*Locker Room*), "Invective" (*Insults*), "Represalii" (*Reprisals*), "Delicte" (*Offenses*), "Scaunul electric" (*The Electric Chair*), "Acvariu" (*Aquarium*).

Victor Brauner illustrated this publication from the first issues.

When it started, *Unu* was rather eclectic, because of its indecision for one current or another. The "Manifesto" that opened the first issue proves the state of mind of the avant-garde, where futurist, dadaist and surrealist echoes sounded:

"airplane
wireless telegraphy – radio
television
76 h.p.
marinetti
breton
vinea
tzara
ribemont-dessaignes
arghezi
brancusi
theo van doesburg
hurrahhhh hurrahhhhhh hurrahhhhhh
the library trash is burning"

Although the Romanian poets of *Unu* never explicitly joined Breton's doctrine, surrealism as a type of writing and as a stylistic mark was increasingly spreading. After 1930, the orientation toward surrealism became more obvious in poetry and in the theoretical debates on specific themes: the dream, automatic writing.

UNU, YEAR BY YEAR: A CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE*

1928

In its first issue, of April 4, 1928, *Unu* offers to its readers M. Petre Popescu – the Poet, an inmate of the psychiatric hospital in Bucharest.

Der Sturm editor Hervarth Walden requests the *Unu* magazine. A constant exchange is established.

The December issue announces the publication of the book *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (*The Last Nights of Paris*) by Philippe Soupault (Paris, Calman Lévy, 1928) and publishes texts by Benjamin Fondane, Léon

Moussinac, A. Adamov, Claude Sernet (three poems: *Mandragore – Mandrake, Hommage – Homage, Colomba*, in French.)

Books that came to Romania: *L'amour, la poésie (Love, Poetry)* by Paul Eluard, *Etes-vous fou? (Are You Crazy?)* by René Crevel, *Sources du vent (Sources of the Wind)* by Pierre Reverdy.

1929

No. 19 (November 1929) publishes surrealist texts indebted to the procedures called “*jeu de définitions*” (game of definitions), “*jeu de suppositions*” (game of suppositions):

“An angel: a lift boy.”

“If a shark itches (eats) you, scratch yourself.”

“Are twins made by carbon copy?”

In fact, we find out from the *Memoirs of Sasa Pana* that the group (Pana, Voronca, Roll, Brauner) had fun making up hot puns; Voronca took great pleasure in doing crossword puzzles in French and he read *Ric et Rac* and the *Canard enchaîné*.

Ilarie Voronca publishes in Paris, in the printing shop of a sponsor at 13, Méchain St., his own book, *Plantes et animaux (Plants and Animals)*, with three drawings by Brancusi, *Poeme in aer liber (Poems in Open Air)* by S. Roll, with drawings by Victor Brauner, and *Jurnal de sex (Sex Diary)* by Geo Bogza. All three for the *Integral* collection.

1930

– *Der Sturm* (XX, no. 8, August-September) is about the writers of the *Unu* group. Poems and prose-poems by Voronca, Roll, Bogza, Urmuz, Fondane, Pana, Raul Iulian, Zarembo, Dimitriu-Pausesti, Moldov are published (translated by Léopold Kosch, who was Victor Brauner's father-in-law at the time.)

– Painters Herold and Perahim make their debut in *Unu*.

– Benjamin Fondane, assistant director with Paramount, sends “*Plein la vue*,” a fragment of his poem *Ulysse (Ulysses)*.

– No. 27 of July is called *Unu alb (White Unu)*. Apart from the usual data – title, number, date, price – the eight pages, not bound, contained no print. It was both an inclination toward non-conformist and challenging gestures, and, implicitly, an invitation for readers to fill up the pages with their own productions, fantasies and delusions.

References to *La femme aux 100 têtes (The Woman with 100 Heads)* by Max Ernst, Ed. du Carrefour (publishing house), 1929.

– The first book published by *Unu*:

Algazy & Grummer, by Urmuz, the great discovery of the avant-garde.

1931

In June, the magazine is announced by posters that imitate election posters:

FOR OUR MOTHERLAND Now it's vital: each citizen must vote for us.
Wonderful people only on our electoral list.

VOTE FOR *UNU* Trust and vote. LIST OF CANDIDATES: louis
aragongo bogzavictor braunerv. cernata. dumitrescu-pausestiandré far-
raul iulian

TRUST AND VOTE m.h. maxymoldovsasa pana

VOTE FOR THE *UNU* PARTYs. perahimstéphane roll tristan tzara ilarie
voronca

The Romanian version of *La peinture au défi* (*Defiant Painting*) by Louis Aragon, written for a collage exhibition at the Galerie Goemans, Paris, 1930, is published in several installments.

In no. 36 (July 1931), an interview with G. Ribemont-Dessaignes by Voronca.

– In summer, Sasa Pana goes to Paris. The colonial exhibition gives him anti-colonial feelings. Claude Sernet is his guide in Paris. With him as an intermediary, Pana buys several drawings signed by Yves Tanguy, Michonze, a frottage by Max Ernst.

– In Paris, Sasa Pana buys a copy of *L'Union libre* (*Free Association*), published without the name of any author (André Breton) or editor; the only information it offered: Paris, MCMXXXI. The poem was published in a Romanian version in the September issue.

– Claude Sernet advises Sasa Pana to publish descriptions of dreams in the magazine. In fact, this first wave of Romanian surrealism, represented by the *Unu* group, and which was rather shy, did not use this kind of writing.

– References on *Nadja* (André Breton, 1928), *Deuil pour deuil – Mourning for Mourning* (Robert Desnos, 1924), *Mon corps et moi – My Body and Myself* (René Crevel, 1925), *Capitale de la douleur – Capital of Anguish* (Paul Eluard, 1926), *Therpsichore – Terpsichore* (Philippe Soupault, 1928).

By the end of the year, the first differences inside the group come to light. Ilarie Voronca had just published *Incantatii* (*Incantations*) at the Cultura Nationala, a highly respectable publishing company, but one which published classics of Romanian literature and selected only the “secure” values out of the contemporaries. After publishing there, Voronca wanted to become a member of the Association of Romanian Writers. Such a step was treason in the eyes of his companions, a proof of bourgeois conformity. They did not hesitate to bitterly mock Voronca. The avant-garde circles were very demanding when it came to the fidelity of their members. Even much later, in 1954, when the restrictive passions and the coercive impulses were expected to be less repressive, Max Ernst was expelled from the surrealist movement for having accepted the Grand Prix of the Venice Biennial.

Sasa Pana and S. Roll decided to break away from surrealism and make room in the pages of *Unu* for a kind of literature that got involved with social

issues and the political left. So, in the issues of the following years, they slipped in notes on movies by Eisenstein and Pudovkin (*The General Line, The Battleship Potemkin, Storm over Asia, October*). In February and April poems by Mayakovsky were published in Romanian for the first time.

1932

After the unprecedented bravery called PULA (*PRICK*), October 1931, the young people grouped around *Alge* (all of them contributors and admirers of *Unu*), published the single issue of *Muci* (*Snot*), with an inscription containing a sentence uttered by the infant Freddy Goldstein: "Once there was a little girl who was peeing in the grass. A cow came and ruminated the grass – and the pee was left there." Those who animated *Muci*, Aurel Baranga, J. Perahim, Gherasim Luca and D. Trost, attempted to make their way into the avant-garde movement.

– The opening of Perahim's first exhibition.

– Marinetti visits Romania. The writers of *Unu* refuse to see him because of the (Fascist) political views the initiator of futurism had. Claude Sernet himself, who had met Marinetti during his stay in Italy, refused to see him. Only Voronca, for courtesy, goes to the official function organized to honor the Italian writer.

– In October, at the 12th Congress of the Romanian Society of Neurology, Psychiatry, Psychology and Endocrinology, two scientists give a lecture: "Dadaism in Literature and Psychiatry," published the same year in the *Medical-Therapeutic Bulletin*. The lecture places emphasis, offering a concrete example, on the relationships between disease and avant-garde literary output. The authors considered the word "dadaist" to mean a melting pot of all new literary experiences. They claimed "the patient" "lost all his poetic inspiration" following treatment. That lecture was a highly symbolic symptom: a reaction against an entire innovative artistic movement and against the social conduct it triggered.

The echo of "the Aragon matter," which began following the publication of the poem *Front rouge* (*Red Front*), is very strong among Romanian avant-garde members. *Unu* publishes a protest against the French officials. The magazine receives the manifestos *Misère de la poésie* (*Distress of Poetry*) and *Paillasse* (*Clowns*). *Fin de l'affaire Aragon* (*End of the Aragon Matter*), published under the signature of André Breton.

This event deepened the crisis inside the *Unu* group. The magazine, which had, from its first beginnings, concentrated the main energies of the Romanian avant-garde, and which had constantly moved toward surrealism, was, at the end of that year, facing difficulties that threatened its very existence. In a political climate where far-right tendencies were increasingly strong, all publications that sympathized with the left were threatened, or ceased being published. On the other hand, the group's cohesion weakened, as each member had problems:

– Ilarie Voronca, who worked at the time for the press service of the Council of Ministers, felt threatened because of his avant-garde activities.

Nicolae Iorga was prime minister. He was the author, among others, of *Byzantium after Byzantium*; he was an avowed enemy of all modern literary currents. Voronca, in fear, progressively reduced his contribution to *Unu* and prepared to leave for France;

– Victor Brauner, shuttling for several years between Paris and Bucharest, also thought about leaving Romania for good – and he did just that in 1938;

– Geo Bogza was always at swords' points with the justice system for “immoral offense,” following the publication of the *Sex Diary* and of several articles in *Unu*;

– Sasa Pana, as an army officer (physician), did not have the right to be “a public personality”. Because he was the owner of the magazine and author of non-conformist literature, the circle was closing in on him.

On the other hand, the Romanian writers who settled in Paris, like Benjamin Fondane or Claude Sernet, close to the Romanian avant-garde, talked about their discontent with the orientation of the magazine. The advice of Sernet, for example, had to do with an expansion of the social area of interest – in his view, they had to write about the state, the family, “the suicide epidemics,” militarism, other issues pertaining to the “marching on of humanism.”

Because of all these inner and outer difficulties, differences and reasons for discontent, it was decided to cease publishing *Unu*. The last issue was published on December 5, 1932: *Unu ultim (Last Unu)*. Of their own accord, Sasa Pana and S. Roll end the publication:

“*Unu* is on the threshold of its sixth year. And, to keep it forever young, we are assassinating it before it goes to elementary school.”

After the “voluntary suicide” of *Unu*, the publishing house bearing the same name continued its activity until the eve of World War II. The important things are the collection of Tristan Tzara's first poetic productions, *Primele poeme urmate de insurectia de la Zürich prezentate de Sasa Pana (The First Poems Followed by the Zurich Insurrection Presented by Sasa Pana)*, Sasa Pana, 1934, and *Sadismul adevarului (The Sadism of Truth)*, Sasa Pana, 1936.

The essays of the former *Unu* owner deal with the Romanian avant-garde, most of all surrealism, illustrated with examples of Romanian and French poets. In a lyrical, rather than critical style, the author speaks of the dream as “lucid sleep” and of the “walking dream,” most certainly influenced by Tristan Tzara's *Grains et Issues (Grains and Bran)*, 1935, which Sasa Pana had received “with the author's sympathy.” The space of the poem is, according to Sasa Pana, “the indefinite place that sur-reality is going to.” Sasa Pana's book does not claim to be original. He just wished to re-trace the road of a group adventure and then to offer a few historical landmarks.

Sasa Pana sent his book to several French surrealists: of them, Paul Eluard and André Breton confirmed having received it.

In a letter of September 20, 1938, mainly dealing with the publication in Romanian of *Les Animaux et leurs hommes, les hommes et leurs animaux*

(*Animals and Their Men, Men and Their Animals*), Paul Eluard wrote to Sasa Pana:

“(...) I have known your activity for a long time now, I deeply appreciate it, and I beg your pardon for not having thanked you earlier for your beautiful book *The Sadism of Truth*, whose cover I reproduced among other documents in no. 10 of the *Minotaure* magazine.

Yours, friendly,

PAUL ELUARD”
Eluard
54, Legendre St.
Paris XVIII.¹

Breton was faster to reply on August 25, 1936, in a letter that could have had important consequences for the Romanian avant-garde:

“Paris, August 25, 1936

Dear Friend,

I’m sorry I didn’t thank you for your beautiful book. I’ve also received the note on it, which helped me not to decipher it, alas!, but to understand its entire depth.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Where is Brauner? Isn’t he coming back, ever?

Why isn’t he writing to me? What is he doing?

I still hope to publish here an international magazine of surrealism, for which I need your cooperation. Is that possible? Would you want to write for the first issue a summary of the intellectual-artistic situation in Romania (from the surrealist point of view, of course)?

Yours most truly,

Signature”
ANDRÉ BRETON,
42, Fontaine St., Paris IX²

Sasa Pana says in his memoirs that he answered Breton, outlining the history of the avant-garde in Romania and the limits of Romanian surrealism. Breton does not make any reference to this in his writings. 7

The surrealism of this first wave is actually superficial and shy. It does not go in-depth with any of the great experiences that are specific to the movement: automatic writing, objective unpredictability, retelling dreams. Psychoanalysis and its practical consequences in writing did not seduce the Romanian poets of the time either. Even if the group had a doctor among them, Sasa Pana, who had given three lectures on psychoanalysis in 1927.

Mostly preoccupied with the reformation of the poetic language, the poets grouped around *Unu* were basically satisfied with the “analogy” and

“image,” as defined by Pierre Reverdy, namely the encounter of two realities: “The more the relationship between two realities is far-fetched and just, the stronger the image.”

The poetry published at the time proves, from this standpoint, a special kind of diversity, suddenly springing out from the frantic inventiveness of Ilarie Voronca:

Ulysse, (Ulysses) 1928; *Plante si animale (Plants and Animals)*, 1929; *Bratara noptilor (The Bracelet of the Nights)* 1929, *Zodiac*, 1930; *Invitatie la bal (Invitation to the Ball)*, 1931; *Petre Schlemihl*, 1932, *Patmos si sase alte poezii (Patmos and Six Other Poems)*, 1933;

from the ludic spirit of Stéphane Roll:

Poeme in aer liber (Poems in Open Air), 1929; *Moartea vie a Eleonorei (The Living Death of Eleonora)*, 1930;

or from the audacity and defiance of social taboos with Geo Bogza:

Jurnal de sex (Sex Diary), 1929; *Poemul-invectiva, cu amprentele digitale ale autorului (The Insult-Poem with the Poet's Fingerprints)*, 1933.

After the disappearance of *Unu*, other magazines took over: they had neither the stability, nor the stature of *Unu*. *Alge (Sea Weeds)* collapsed a few months later (May 1933), after the young Luca, Paun and Perahim got out clean from their trouble with the Prosecution, when charged with pornography. *Meridian*, a rather marginal magazine, (published outside the capital, in the city of Craiova) and which did moderate avant-garde, had no impact on the literary circles.

The one left to point to is the single issue of *Viata imediata (Everyday Life)*, December 1933. Geo Bogza, former director and editor of the *Urmuz* magazine (1928), a former contributor to *Unu*, associated himself with the three survivors of *Alge*, Luca, Paun and Perahim. Together, they signed a manifesto called *Poezia pe care vrem sa o facem (The Poetry We Wish to Write)*.

The program-article follows a rhetoric that already had an established tradition behind it: the discourse acquired an inaugural aura and went along two lines, the negation of literature and of the preceding movements and the assertion of a new program. The authors of the manifesto criticized their predecessors, and especially the poets of *Unu*, called “the knights of hermetic modernism”, for having reduced poetry to a matter of technique only. Poetry, the way it was written before that article was published, was defined at the same time as “abstract and intellectual”, “hermetic”, or even “pure poetry”. It is possible to see Breton’s influence, namely that of the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* in the options of Bogza, Luca, Paun, and Perahim. They leave aside the artistic aspect in favor of the “elementary aesthetics of life”. “We wish to write the poetry that belongs to our own epoch, which is no longer the time of mass neurosis, but a time of the desire to live.” This poetry had to accompany man in his existential adventure, recovering its vigor by a return to the sources: life. The “convulsive beauty” Breton talked about became in the text of the Romanian writers “violent beauty”, and the

surrealist credo taken from Lautréamont (“poetry will be made by all”) is to be found, barely modified, in the complementary version “poetry for all”.

The four writers got together on the occasion of this manifesto in the pages of an evanescent publication, to fill up the space left empty and to proclaim their will to continue the avant-garde action. They evolved differently: Geo Bogza stayed in the avant-garde circles, bent that way by his non-conformity; soon, he left poetry to write noteworthy news stories.

In 1940-1944 Perahim left and stayed out of Romania, where he felt threatened; he went to the USSR. After the war, he became a professor at the Fine Arts School in Bucharest, but he did not “chant” the glory of “socialist realism” to achieve that. “The crossing of the desert”³ for the Romanian painter ended in 1969, when he arrived in Paris; there, he returned to his surrealist antecedents.

Gherasim Luca and Paul Paun began to publish their first books, coming increasingly close to surrealism. They marked a new stage of the Romanian avant-garde by forming, with the poets Gellu Naum and Virgil Teodorescu, the Romanian Surrealist Group, in 1940.

During that time, the first critical reactions against the avant-garde came out. Nicolae Iorga, who was something like a national prophet, conducted a violent press campaign against modern currents, which, in his view, corrupted the national spirit. Equally, the poet Radu Gyr, who was close to the ideological and political circles of the extreme right, also attacked the avant-garde in his lectures at Bucharest University in the 1936-1937 academic year; those lectures were later published in the literary press.

G. Calinescu, the most important literary critic of the time, published his *Lectures on Poetry*⁴, where he made a first analysis of the avant-garde poetics, placing them in a general context that had to do with the evolution of poetry and its specific language.

Other critical references to the avant-garde were published in literary magazines of the years 1939-1940.

*Translated from French
by Monica VOICULESCU*

NOTES

* Source: the *Unu* collection, 50 issues, April 1928-December 1932, The Romanian Academy Library, and the *Memoirs of Sasa Pana, Born in '02*, Bucharest, Eminescu Publishing House, 1972, 688 pages.

1. Sasa Pana, op. cit., p. 581.
2. *Ibid.*, facsimile of the letter outside the text.
3. Edouard Jaguer, *Perahim*, Ed. Non Lieu, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1978. Reprinted by *Arcane 17*, 1990.
4. Lectures given at the Iasi University in 1938; published in the *Adevarul literar si artistic (Literary and Artistic Truth)* paper, November 1937-June 1938, and reprinted in the book *Principii de estetica (Principles of Aesthetics)*, 1939. See also G. Calinescu, *Studii de poetica (Studies in Poetics)*, with a foreword by A. Piru, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1972, p. 1-91.