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## Expressionist Models in Interwar Romania

**Abstract:** The idea of a 'German model' or 'French model' in avant-garde history can be connected to virtual maps of movements such as Expressionism or Constructivism on the one hand and Surrealism on the other. While Expressionism and Constructivism (connected to the Bauhaus project) were largely influential in countries where irradiations from Berlin became important, Surrealism enjoyed more success in cultures where Paris was considered to be the most important artistic center. These were never exclusive influences, however, Romania representing a complex cultural landscape in this sense. Through the case study of the avant-garde and more specifically of Expressionism, the author reflects on the relevance of discussing the presence of the German model in the Romanian avant-garde, arguing that by opening up Romanian literature towards extraterritorial, multilingual, minority variants, the idea of cultural transfers becomes even more relevant for the field. Through discussing the works of Hungarian minority authors in Romania, the article identifies transitional forms that negotiate between modernist and avant-garde, French and German cultural models, urban and rural topics, rational and instinctive approaches.

**Keywords:** avant-garde, Expressionism, French cultural model, German cultural model, transitional forms

The history of avant-garde art can be seen as a series of events that transcend national borders in a systematic way. The emergence of the avant-garde coincides historically with the generational aspiration of young artists to reframe the institutional background of fine arts and also with the more general anti-establishment strategies devised by authors. As Sascha Bru points out in his recent history of the European Avant-Gardes, these authors adopted transnational models of artistic exchange,<sup>1</sup> which did not necessarily deny the relevance of national values but created an alternative route towards success. Anti-establishment strategies generally meant conflicts with local and national academia, while international networks of avant-garde art paved the way for an alternative professionalization.

Even in the case of the avant-garde we can identify, however, conflicting historical patterns, ones that may be conceptualized as following either a "German

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1 Sascha Bru, *The European Avant-Gardes, 1905–1935: A Portable Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 136.

model” or a “French model.” These could be more precisely circumscribed as spatial extensions rather than national ones – the avant-garde being linked to great cities with a mobile and fluctuating population rather than to countries. The most important of these centers were clearly Paris and Berlin during the first decades of the avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the irradiation of different avant-garde currents was facilitated by these major nodes in the network of the international avant-garde movement.

If we try to identify the meaning of a “German model” or “French model” in avant-garde history, the most enlightening examples to argue in favor of such concepts could be the virtual maps of movements such as Expressionism or Constructivism, on the one hand, and Surrealism on the other. While Expressionism and Constructivism (connected to the Bauhaus project) were largely influential in countries where irradiations from Berlin became important, Surrealism enjoyed more success in cultures where Paris was considered to be the most important artistic center. These were never exclusive influences; however, it would be more precise to see them as dominant patterns rather than exclusivist ones.

Romania represents a complex cultural landscape in this sense. While we can easily reach the conclusion that the French model is predominant in the Romanian cultural field, indicated by the strong influence of Surrealism in Romanian art and literature, and facilitated by the history of Romanian language, the German model is not to be neglected either. The “inter-imperial” position of Romania,<sup>3</sup> combined with more general characteristics of semiperipheral literatures, resulted in hybridizations and dynamic adaptations that mirrored specific social, political, and cultural requirements of the interwar Romanian population.

First, my article will identify a gradual shift in the interpretation of the Romanian avant-garde, highlighting the combination of the two models. Second, I will discuss other possible elements shared across minority cultures in Romania, which can increase the relevance of discussing the presence of the German model in the Romanian territory by considering Expressionism as example. Thirdly, I will briefly address the consequences of such restructuring endeavors within narratives concerning Romanian modernist literature.

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2 Ibid., 103.

3 Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022).

## Histories of the Romanian Avant-Garde

The retrospective inclusion of the Romanian avant-garde into literary histories began relatively early, around 1969, with the publication of Sașa Pană's illustrative anthology of avant-garde literature<sup>4</sup> and Ion Pop's influential volume discussing the poetics of the Romanian avant-garde.<sup>5</sup> Apart from these two, it was mainly Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, Matei Călinescu, Nicolae Balotă, and Adrian Marino who contributed to the debates on the matter with their seminal books and articles during this decade.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the research questions and the manner in which avant-garde texts were discussed seemed for a long time to be influenced by Ion Pop's contributions. In essence, Pop's interpretations proposed an aesthetic approach to the avant-garde: whenever the texts' literary-historical context was discussed, it was mainly the aspects of institutional history and general characteristics of the movements that were discussed, and the specific avant-garde genre of the manifesto very often became the central triggering point of the interpretations. Pop's analyses involving close reading, sensitive to poetic motifs, naturally grew into monographic volumes, which employed similar reading techniques when discussing the works of Lucian Blaga, Ilarie Voronca, or Gellu Naum. Pop's reading was a quite natural and spontaneous counterreaction to earlier over-politicized interpretations, that often saw the avant-garde as an anomaly, as a symptom of decadence, and tended to incorporate it into literary histories solely as a precursor to proletarian literature, as a specific progressive prelude to socialist realism. The poetical innovations of the sixties and seventies in Romanian literature naturally brought new arguments in favor of the autonomy of literature, and for a short time, before another conservative turn in cultural politics, scholars and poets were able to assert this aesthetic point of view concerning the avant-gardes.

The fundamental question raised by this approach was related to the social engagement of literature and of avant-garde artists: to what extent should a monograph on the avant-garde include the socio-contextual function of the works

4 Sașa Pană (ed.), *Antologia literaturii române de avangardă* (Bucharest: Ed. Pentru Literatură, 1969).

5 Ion Pop, *Avangardismul poetic românesc* (Bucharest: Ed. Pentru Literatură, 1969).

6 Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română și expresionismul* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1971); Matei Călinescu, "Avangarda literară în România," in *Antologia literaturii române de avangardă*, ed. Sașa Pană, 5-33.; Nicolae Balotă, *Urmuz* (Cluj: Dacia, 1970); Nicolae Balotă, *Lupta cu absurdul* (Bucharest: Univers, 1971); Adrian Marino, *Dicționar de idei literare*. vol. I (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1973).

that the avant-garde manifestos imbued them with? The social engagement of the Romanian avant-garde artists was linked to a different historical situation from that of Hungarian artists in the neighboring regions<sup>7</sup> – and unfolded in several, essentially different phases. Most importantly, we can identify the specific relationship between Romanian writers and left-wing movements, which was not without its hurdles, in analogy to the one between Paris surrealists and the French Communist Party. Breton, Aragon, Éluard, Artaud, and Tzara were all surrealists, but their relationship with communist organizations brought them into conflict from time to time: their views ranged from a complete abandonment of surrealist poetics and experimentation to a demand for the autonomy of the movement and of individual creative work. Many times, these lead to a revision of their earlier ideas.

In the case of Hungarian authors, this type of disillusionment occurred a decade earlier, in the aftermath of the short-lived 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic of Councils. Many avant-garde authors, including Lajos Kassák, were enthusiastic about the possibilities that such social changes could bring about, but became disillusioned seeing the failure of the communist leaders not only to lead the country successfully, but also, more specifically, to incorporate what they saw as progressive, avant-garde cultural achievements into their projects.

This aspect may make us acknowledge that the Hungarian avant-garde itself developed further according to the aforementioned German model, while Romanian avant-gardists predominantly followed the French model.<sup>8</sup> Additional arguments in this sense are offered by the extraterritorial dimensions of the Hungarian and the Romanian avant-gardes, respectively. While in the interwar period, one of the main publications of the Hungarian avant-garde, the review *Ma*, was published between 1920 and 1926 in Viennese exile by Lajos Kassák, and while another major avant-garde author, Tibor Déry, experimented with becoming a bilingual, Hungarian-German writer, the Romanian exile artists such

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7 Imre József Balázs, "From Avant-Garde to Socialist Realism: Continuities and Discontinuities in Hungarian and Romanian Literature," in *Socialist Realism in Central and Eastern European Literatures: Institutions, Dynamics, Discourses*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Natalia Jonsson-Skradol (London: Anthem Press, 2018), 147–164.

8 For a foray into the influence exerted on the Hungarian literary community in Romania by the German model well into the twentieth century, see Imre József Balázs, "Representing Countercultures and Alternative Lifestyles: Hippies and Bohemians in Minority Literatures from Romania (1968–1983)," in *Beyond the Iron Curtain. Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania*, eds. Ștefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru, and Andrei Terian (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 133–148.

as Tristan Tzara and later Ilarie Voronca or Benjamin Fondane tended to be active in the French cultural field, switching to writing in French. All of them naturally had many cultural and familial ties to their home countries.

However, the conceptualizations that follow these lines of thought have consequences for narratives of literary history as well. While Expressionism was conceived as a clearly avant-garde current in Hungarian literary histories from the very start, Romanian monographs considered Expressionism in its intermediate position. To quote an explicit claim made by Ion Pop on this matter, we can notice a hesitation as far as the challenging quality of Expressionism for avant-garde studies is concerned:

“From a very strict point of view, considering the definition of the avant-garde spirit under the sign of negation and of radical, absolute innovation, from the total corpus of interpreted texts, many would not fall within the framework of such a clearly articulated program. One might even question whether Expressionist poetics, insofar as it lies under the turbulent and disintegrating tensions of the modern spirit, is actually situated in the most specific avant-garde terrain. This is because Expressionist literary discourse does not reach, in its own directions of manifestation, those extremes of deconstruction that illustrate the aforementioned avant-garde radicalism, detectable rather in other modern currents such as Futurism, which demanded the destruction of syntax and of the self in literature, or Dadaism with its words haphazardly mixed in a bag, and even surrealism, with its automatic writing, for which syntax is left as prey to the unrestrained freedom of the free flow of the imagination.”<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, we may conclude that definitions of the avant-garde within the paradigm of the ‘German model’ differ radically from those of the ‘French model.’ To be more precise, we should admit that different structures of modernism emerge in these literatures according to our focus on contrasting aspects of semi-peripheral literatures.

Beginning with the 1970s, an alternative history of the Romanian avant-garde emerged, in the works of scholars such as Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu<sup>10</sup> or Dan Grigorescu.<sup>11</sup> The result of their effort was to create an inventory of possible Expressionist elements in Romanian art and literature, in strong connection to the interwar reception of the movement. In a more recent, comprehensive handbook of the Romanian avant-garde, one of the leading scholars of the field, Ovidiu

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9 Ion Pop, “Introduceri în spațiul avangardei maghiare (III),” *Tribuna* 8, no. 164 (2009): 7. [my translation, IJB. All other translations from the Hungarian belong to me except stated otherwise].

10 Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română și expresionismul*.

11 Dan Grigorescu, *Istoria unei generații pierdute: expresioniștii* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1980).

Morar, whose interpretations largely followed Ion Pop's approach in his previous works, published a representative volume including separate chapters of all five central avant-garde movements of European literature - Expressionism, Dada, Futurism, Constructivism, and Surrealism.<sup>12</sup> In a way, this contribution can be considered a symbolic landmark in Romanian avant-garde studies, synthesizing the conclusions of previous interpretations following the narratives focused on the German model and the French model, respectively, and opening up the field for more sophisticated approaches whereby the circulation of ideas, forms, and mental constructs occurs according to more complex relations. In Morar's volume, the emergence of Expressionism in Romanian literature is attributed to authors such as Lucian Blaga, Adrian Maniu, Ion Vinea, Scarlat Callimachi, Benjamin Fundoianu, Al. Philippide, H. Bonciu, Ion Călugăru.

Pluralizing the idea of Romanian literature itself may be another route to explore these issues, adding further arguments to the discussions about plural cultural models. If we open up Romanian literature towards extraterritorial, multilingual, minority variants,<sup>13</sup> we will find that the idea of cultural transfers becomes more dynamic. In the next part of my article, I will discuss the presence of Expressionist literature in the works of Hungarian minority authors from Romania in the interwar period.

### Four Variants of Expressionism in Interwar Transylvanian Hungarian Literature

After Transylvania officially became part of Greater Romania, Hungarian minority authors continued their Transylvanian literary activity in a renewed network of literary institutions. Some of these institutions had been partially founded during the previous decades of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, while other, newly constituted institutions responded to the current, interwar needs to establish a functional background for regional cultural endeavors. The ideology of Transylvanism,<sup>14</sup> promoting the historical and geographical exceptionalism of the Transylvanian region, as well as intercultural exchange meant to establish political cooperation among Romania's different ethnic groups, became the

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12 Ovidiu Morar, *Avangardismul românesc* (Bucharest: Idcea Europeană, 2005).

13 Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.), *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

14 László Boka, "A Missed Opportunity? Transylvania as a Virtual Central Europe," *Hungarian Studies Yearbook* 3, no. 1 (2021): 11-28.

dominant cultural paradigm for Hungarian intellectuals in Transylvania. Transylvanism assimilated the German cultural heritage of the local Saxon population and therefore made sure that the 'German model' remained relevant for the inhabitants of the region. What was the role played by Expressionism in this context and how was it conceptualized? As we shall show, although Expressionism was seen as an innovative mental construct paving the way for Transylvanian Hungarians to react to the challenges of new, modern lifestyles and the crises they entailed – while Transylvanism was largely based on traditional values – there were points of intersection between the two constructs. I will illustrate the reception of Expressionism through four examples.

First example: the most accurate and most scientific approach belonged to László Dienes (1889–1953), an émigré critic who fled Budapest because of his left-wing political affiliations and who became the founding editor of the *Korunk* [Our Age] journal in Cluj-Napoca in 1926. When publishing a whole book about the question of new, progressive art forms in 1925,<sup>15</sup> Dienes tried to explain the novelty of avant-garde art forms through the changes occurred in the worldview of European populations. The First World War and other political events indicated to Dienes that new art forms were required to express new types of concerns and anxieties. These two fragments show the careful theoretical argumentation made by Dienes:

“The image is dominated by a metaphysical law, an abstraction, an imaginary global principle, an intuition, and the expression of this law determines the place of all the colors and lines in the image [...] The object of the image is therefore the experience, not what is objectively represented in it.”<sup>16</sup>

This resonates with the attempts to define Expressionism according to the subjective and material-objective dimensions of the artistic endeavor. The other fragment describes this relationship from a technical point of view as well:

“The point of departure is no longer the diversity of the outside world having thousands of colors and thousands of forms, but the sense that the world outside, spread out in an infinite variety in nature, appears in its complete unity in the spaceless point of our consciousness. That our self-consciousness is the microcosm, on the analogue of which we must imagine the macrocosm if we want to understand it, or, more importantly, to feel its essence.”<sup>17</sup>

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15 László Dienes, *Művészet és világnézet* (Cluj: Lapkiadó és Nyomdai Műintézet, 1925).

16 *Ibid.*, 63.

17 *Ibid.*, 65.

Dienes's variant was clearly in line with the ideas shared by the German expressionists themselves. His main objective was to shape a horizon of expectations in a rather conservative cultural field and express his conviction that new types of sensitivities were needed to adequately respond to the new realities of the time. He did not insist in this 1925 text on articulating explicit political goals, but his later publications demonstrate that his volume can be considered a stage in the pursuit of a left-wing political agenda, opposing both the official Hungarian cultural policies dictated by Budapest and the general political climate in Romania, including Hungarian minority policies. Dienes was one of the most sophisticated thinkers and most enlightened promoters of the avant-garde in the Transylvanian cultural field, his 1925 volume and the first three series of *Korunk* being his most important contributions to Romanian culture.

Second example: János Bartalis (1893–1976) was a major representative of interwar Transylvanian Hungarian poetry, his trademark approach being to write his poetry in free verse, quite unusual for Hungarian poetry of that time outside the avant-garde. Another trait that puzzled Bartalis's critics was that he combined rural themes with modernist poetics – this aspect placed him after all in the position of an “instinctual poet,” who presumably reached the flow of free verse spontaneously rather than out of a search for innovative expression. As Bartalis spent a whole decade in urban environments in Cluj, Budapest, Karlsbad, etc., reading Ibsen, Walt Whitman, Kassák, and others before publishing his first poetry book, we could be more to the point considering his approach to poetry as programmatic. He even published an activist manifesto in the Cluj-based review *Napkelet*, in 1920:<sup>18</sup>

“The shackles – the greatest shame of human thought – have been thrown off, and now the rapture of new beliefs, new deeds, new creations is roaring towards the sky. The thought, squeezed into the narrow pool of long years, unfolds, rushing with a happy flood towards infinity. There is no limit and no barrier to stop it. With a primitive consciousness, the goal is everything, the goal is infinity.”<sup>19</sup>

In Bartalis's case, activism entails a utopian approach to social issues, without a very precise political agenda. Hungarian activists of Expressionist descent insist on the importance of imagining a new man, capable of creating and inhabiting the new world which is about to come. The main idea underpinning such approaches is clearly the priority assigned to mentalities as opposed to power

18 Pál Deréky, *A vasbetontorony költői* (Budapest: Argumentum, 1993), 67.

19 János Bartalis, “Az új művészet elé,” *Napkelet* 1, no. 6 (1920), 321.



structures. Activists sought to first introduce new concepts and shape mentalities in order to facilitate future social and political occurrences. Bartalis remained an important interwar poet, his minimalist discourse borrowing the tone of a reportage during the 1920s and 1930s and innovating Hungarian rural poetry in taking a step away from folklore-like traditions.

In his case, Expressionism got closest to the grotesque nature of the movement's German rendition. Bartalis was an officer during the First World War, and when describing his experiences, precisely the grotesque elements of his literary discourse enabled him to formulate criticism against the military condition. The lived experience of the war was, in Bartalis's view, far from being heroic. Irony and the presence of everyday language shaped his view of the war in the poem *Királyok* [Kings]:

"The sky is turning yellow up above. This yellow hides coldness. This particular yellow is very cold, so strange. The urine of my poor soldiers is also yellow and pitted, like big, squashed sponges in the snow. The wrecks of sponges are frozen now. I wonder which of my men urinated them? Each one has a different shape. How many pictures, how many yellow drawings, how many faded, hoarse, coughing soldiers. Oh, you beautiful, cold, sick soldiers, proud, pissing kings. My weapon in my hand. I caress the hilt of my sword. I am ready to kill."

Third example: Jenő Szentimrei (1891–1959) was, besides Bartalis, one of the few Transylvanian Hungarian poets writing in free verse. For him, the experience of war was also an important argument for adopting an innovative poetic language. In an article published in *Napkelet*, he wrote about the link between chaotic and anarchic experience and the urge to express this experience in a direct, unmediated manner:

"Wasn't there a profound change in this world, in the individual, social, political, scientific, and practical life of this world, since then [since Endre Ady's poetic debut], which, by the force of law, commands a new voice to the poet who must unravel this chaos never seen, never felt, never even dreamed of? [...] It was from this Archimedean point that a new lyric set out to conquer and subjugate the terrifying river of man that had once confronted him out there in the fields and had overwhelmed his imagination like a nightmare."<sup>20</sup>

20 Jenő Szentimrei, "Új költők, új formák, új élet," *Pásztortűz* 13, no. 11 (1927), 263.

In Szentimrei's case we can also identify, however, an element of Expressionist worldview that we may again consider an adaptation of the "German model" - i.e., an organicist, vitalist view critical of the society of the time. In this sense, the energy inherent in the flood, analogous to the free flowing of words, is essential in renewing society, culture, literature ("Az ár felel a gátnak"/"The Flood Answers to the Dam"). The flood clearly brings destruction - a destruction already experienced during the war -, but the flow of water also means life, an indispensable element for every living creature on Earth:

"So go ahead, dam,  
play your own part!  
But the tide lives and rages over you,  
like a hurricane's energy over quicksand."

In Szentimrei's view, man cannot fully understand life and his own role without acknowledging that nature is part of being human, with all the inherent conflicts and issues that rationalization can hide but not fully eliminate.

Fourth example: a specific generational approach to Expressionism can be identified in a 1923 anthology bringing together young Hungarian writers and poets from Transylvania.<sup>21</sup> Here, the presence of nature is felt in another, mythical way. Experiencing nature becomes a ritual and therefore, the literary text acquires archaic, performative dimensions. This rendition of Expressionism is rooted in German Expressionism as well, mainly in its theatre, and was introduced to Hungarian literature through texts signed by Dezső Szabó, with thematic roots reaching as far back as the Naturalist fiction of the previous decade.

As we can see, Expressionism does not contain a single, uniform discourse in the Hungarian texts published in Romania. Its functionalities are also multiple. Through translations, theatre representations, and articles published across literary magazines, the ideas expressed by Hungarian, Romanian, and German authors circulated during the interwar period throughout the multilingual Transylvanian literary field. If we look for shared traits in the creations of Romanian authors such as Lucian Blaga, we may consider the adapted Expressionist models in the works of Hungarian and German minority authors as well.

### Towards an Inclusive View

When describing the relationship between the Transylvanian Hungarian minority literature written in Hungarian and Romanian literature, we have to point

21 Ferenc Balázs et al., *Versek, elbeszélések, tanulmányok tizenegy fiatal erdélyi írótól erdélyi művészek rajaival* (Cluj: Minerva, 1923).

out the structural differences between their avant-gardes, both in terms of periodization and their major sub-movements (Constructivism being a common element). The German model seems more important for Hungarian authors than for Romanians, because of language and because of their shared history. However, when considering the question of whether there is some regional variation of the Hungarian Transylvanian avant-garde which is different from the Hungarian avant-garde in general, another conclusion emerges when taking heed to the connection with the institutional framework. In Transylvania, the avant-garde did not go through the same conflict with aestheticist modernism as in Budapest. The famous 1916/1917 dispute between Mihály Babits, the promoter of the aestheticism of the *Nyugat* [The West] magazine, and Lajos Kassák, the founder of the first Hungarian avant-garde magazines (*A Tett* and *Ma*), created a conflictual connection between modernism and the avant-garde.<sup>22</sup> The institutional and canonical framework of Romanian modernisms and avant-gardes repeated this pattern, their relationship being controversial in spite of later aestheticist approaches highlighting their common characteristics.

On the other hand, in interwar Hungarian literature from Romania, the avant-gardists often promoted themselves in the same journals as the modernists or Transylvanians. *Napkelet* in Cluj (1920–1922), *Genius*, *Új Genius*, and partly *Periszkop* in Arad (1924–1926) are examples of this shared literary field. In a way, based on such examples, the history of the modernization of Hungarian literature from Romania can be structured on fine transitions, and the avant-garde can be convincingly included in this narrative thread.

It is true, however, that avant-gardes, even regional ones, are cosmopolitan, interregional, transnational structures, with minor languages intersecting majority discourses and multiple cultural models. An extraterritorial approach opens up the discussion towards an avant-garde poly-system which, having an experimental and extreme quality, also explores this dimension, which is potentially inherent in any national culture, including semi-peripheral ones.

My examples describing Expressionism's presence in the works of Transylvanian Hungarian authors may offer models for further discussions concerning transitions and fine-tuned differentiations. We have seen that Expressionism is considered a transitional art form between typically modern and avant-garde

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22 Pál Deréky, "Az esztétizmus és az avantgárd vitája a magyar irodalomban (1916–1917)," in Deréky, "Latabagomár ó talatta latabagomár és finfi". *A XX. század eleji magyar avantgárd irodalom* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1998), 34–63.

art, and international overviews confirm this aspect.<sup>23</sup> As an avant-garde, it is moderate, while as a modernism, it is frequently militant. In the case of semi-peripheral cultures like Romanian one, situated between different zones of cultural influence, these transitional forms may become examples that negotiate between modernist and avant-garde, French and German, urban and rural, rational and instinctive, major and minor approaches. After all, one of the well-known catchphrases of the Romanian avant-garde was synthesis, the idea of which even helped coin a specific avant-garde movement, namely Integralism, created mostly against a Constructivist background. A careful analysis should ideally include all these elements, in spite of their traditional, conflictual, and oppositional readings.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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