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Tom **SANDQVIST**



**EAST**

THE ROMANIANS  
*of* CABARET  
VOLTAIRE

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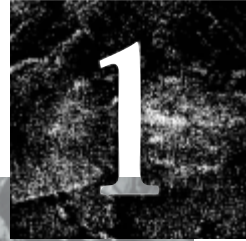
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**I N T R O D U C T I O N**

**1**





Dada was a curious movement. Early in the last century the dadaists were shouting and yelling, roaring and bawling, standing on the tiny platform of the restaurant Meierei in Zurich trying to carry out a global revolution in art and culture. They recited so-called simultaneous poems, *poèmes simultanés*, totally incomprehensible verses of nonsense. Often dressed in grotesque costumes and mostly in funny, ridiculous, but occasionally dreadful masks as well, they performed equally absurd, idiotic, “meaningless” small plays, hit both small and big drums and lids of saucepans and frying pans, gave deafening hissing-concerts, and sang howling “negro songs.” The dadaists mocked the audience as much as they could, stamped on the floor, roared and yelled, tore to pieces conventional poetry, tore into rags syntax and grammatically correct constructions of verbal meaning, turned upside down both particular words and language itself, the letters, the sentences, formerly well-organized and architecturally well-composed meanings. Everything was spread out on the same flat surface or was thrown into the same boiling, bubbling, babbling pot.

Most reference works for both art and literature, but also more specialized studies, claim that Dada was born on 5 February 1916 when Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings opened the literary cabaret that they had named Cabaret Voltaire at the restaurant Meierei on Spiegelgasse in Zurich. This is only partly true, since giving this exact moment of birth and the exact spot of the “delivery of the child” doesn’t take into account any possible moments of conception or, for that matter, any proper cultural and historical settings, beyond the acknowledgment of those scattered artistic and literary impulses, mainly in Germany, that might have affected the dadaist activists during or just before the outbreak of World War I. Certainly there are faithful mentions of both Tristan Tzara and the three brothers Marcel, Jules, and Georges Janco having been born in Romania, even though it is often forgotten that one more artist born in Romania took part in the scandalous activities of the Cabaret Voltaire from the first evening, namely Arthur Segal. It is certainly true that hundreds of artists, writers, actors, journalists, and other intellectuals from all over Europe were living and working in the small Swiss city at the same time, together with almost as many political refugees, professional revolutionaries, and anarchists, among them a certain Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov, who just one year later staged the Bolshevik coup d’état in Petrograd and thus became known worldwide as Lenin. But the fact that

half the first dadaist group was Romanian is nevertheless remarkable enough that this fact needs an explanation beyond what can be labeled merely a coincidence.

What did they do in Zurich, those five Romanian intellectuals? Who were they, why did they choose Zurich of all cities in Europe, and what had they done before they decided to settle down in that town on the shore of Zürichsee? And in what way was their dadaism at the stage of Cabaret Voltaire influenced by their Romanian background, if it was at all?

According to the American art historian S. A. Mansbach,<sup>1</sup> much of modernism was undeniably born on the eastern margins of industrial Europe—constructivism in the tsarist Empire, uniquely creative forms of cubo-expressionism in Habsburg Bohemia, and dadaism in royal Romania. Moreover, it was in the immense geographical swath from the Baltic to the Balkans that aesthetics of progressive character and insistent social applicability were articulated—philosophies that would fundamentally define the modernist mission universally. Western scholars have long viewed the 1916 display of dadaism at the Cabaret Voltaire as an original event, indeed as a defining phenomenon in the evolution of modernism. Yet, says Mansbach, though failing to give any substantial evidence of his arguments, this milestone may be interpreted otherwise from the perspective of Romania. Bucharest and Iași had for several years witnessed a form of Dada *avant la lettre*, been amazed by Dada poetry and prose, and been provoked by Dada visual spectacle, although these manifestations went under other names. Thus, when a group of Romanian modernists traveled to Switzerland, they, according to Mansbach, transposed to the stage of the Cabaret Voltaire a “dadaism” that was already an important and publicly manifested form of artistic engagement in their homeland. Furthermore, says Mansbach, what Western artists and audiences—and a succession of historians—witnessed as authentically novel in Zurich was actually an intermediate stage in the history of Romanian modern art. Further, dadaism was a form of radical expression that would later attain some of its most imaginative actualizations in Bucharest (and Iași)—as well as powerfully expressive variants in Zagreb and Belgrade—rather than in Berlin, Hannover, Rotterdam, or New York, where its development has been primarily chronicled.

Why is it like this? Can we trace any patterns of influences back to their own, not yet discovered cultural origin?

The cultural capital drained away by communism in one way or another was gigantic. This affected especially the extremely lively and exuberant Romanian avant-garde that lasted from the 1920s to the early 1940s, condemned by the Romanian communist regime as being “bourgeois” and most of all “anti-Romanian,” as well as basic parts of the almost equally vivid cultural life in Romania before the outbreak of World War I, i.e., that Central and Eastern European cultural and artistic context which I claim is the very hotbed of Dada, even more important and decisive than the Western European influences. The Romanian avant-garde, starting already before the disastrous war, deserves its own biography, which has now become possible for the first time thanks to the opening of archives and a freer cultural climate, which no longer allows it to be characterized as some kind of artistic mistake or as marked by “abnormal frames of mind and other personality disorders,” as Constantin Ciopraga, a communist Romanian literary scholar, writes as late as the early 1980s; and one of the introductory chapters in this biography must undoubtedly be concerned just as much with the influence of French symbolism around the turn of the century as with international dadaism and particularly its birth in Zurich in 1916.

The leading light of the innermost circle of Dada is considered to be Tristan Tzara, stationed in Paris from 1921 as an active and noted member of the French surrealist group under André Breton. Born in 1896 as Samuel Rosenstock in the town of Moinești, not far from Iași, Tzara began his literary career at the age of fifteen within the emerging avant-garde, in which Arthur Segal and the Janco brothers were active as well, and when Tzara founded the magazine *Simbolul* in 1912, together with Marcel and Iuliu Iancu and the poets Ion Vinea (Eugen Iovanaki) and Adrian Maniu, he was already a more or less mature poet fully aware of his capacity. This magazine was followed three years later by Ion Vinea’s magazine *Chemarea*, in which Tzara published poems that are said to be reminiscent of the automatism of both Dada and surrealism, and in which one of the avant-garde’s first clearly iconoclastic manifestos was made public at the same time as the poet Tudor Arghezi’s deliberately prosaic poems in the magazine *Cronica* clearly parodied traditional lyrics. Eugène Ionesco (Eugen Ionescu), a good friend of practically all these poets, has described the literary avant-garde in Bucharest before Tzara and the Janco brothers went to Zurich (in 1915 and 1914, respectively) as a movement wishing to be modernist but which has to be characterized rather more as symbolist, although there were also early

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Was ist **dada**?

Eine Kunst? Eine Philosophie? eine Politik?  
Eine Feuerversicherung?

Oder: Staatsreligion?

ist **dada** wirkliche **Energie**?

oder ist es  **Garnichts**, d. h.  
alles?

FIGURE 1.1

"What is Dada? Art? Philosophy?

Politics? Fire insurance?"

FIGURE 1.2

Calea Victoriei, Bucharest,  
in the 1920s. Academia Română,  
Bucharest.



attempts and strivings resembling those that were to continue in Italy, France, and Switzerland within futurism and Dada. They took freely from both international symbolism and their own folklorist poetry, at the same time keeping themselves informed of the European avant-gardes and modernism in general.

With no continuous research, it is more or less impossible to establish any definite links between, for instance, the futurism, surrealism, and absurdism that later came to flourish in Milan, Paris, Berlin, and Hannover, along with similar modes of expression that had earlier sprouted in Romanian provincial towns, if not directly in the capital, and, for instance, certain strains in Romanian and generally Eastern European popular tradition. More material is also required to be able to establish the particular role of, for instance, the popular Eastern European absurdist Yiddish tradition which has undoubtedly been decisively influential in European avant-gardism, but the fact remains that Tristan Tzara, the Janco brothers, and Arthur Segal, in fact the vast majority of the Romanian avant-gardists, were born and grew up in a Jewish culture and tradition in a country which around the turn of the century had a Jewish population of over 300,000 out of a total population of six million. The Jewish population had risen by the beginning of the 1930s to almost half a million, most of all in places such as Bucharest, Iași, Botoșani, and Galați—and Moinești, Tzara's birthplace—where the Jews comprised more than 50 percent of the entire population, all Yiddish-speaking and most of them Eastern European Hasids.

It is as self-evident as it is frustrating that, because of the former communist regime, the conditions of doing research on the Romanian avant-garde and its historical, cultural, and artistic presumptions before World War I are not the best. The domestic tradition of research doesn't seem to support the collecting of necessary empirical facts, while both libraries and archives are still struggling against manifestly obsolete structures and practices, as well as against minimal or nonexistent material resources. From the few scholars with interest and experience in this field, the good will and the readiness to assist the foreign scholar are far greater than the actual help, with—of course—a few brilliant, even dazzling exceptions, at the same time as efficient research is obstructed by the limited number of updated studies and analyses even in the Romanian language, not to speak of other more accessible languages. Of course, it is difficult to prove that the unwillingness to share research

FIGURE 1.3

Poster for *Contimporanul's*  
international exhibition in  
Bucharest, 1924.

STRADA CORABIEI No. 6

No. 50-51

CATALOG

PRIMA EXPOZIȚIE INTERNAȚIONALĂ

**CONTIMPORANUL**

30 NOIEMBRIE - 30 DECEMBRIE 1924

SALA „SINDICATULUI ARTELOR FRUMOSE“

hans ARP ■  
artur SEBAL ■  
BRANCUȘI ■  
Dorimont ■  
serwranckx ■  
IANCU ■  
l'empereur HAUT ■  
KURT ■  
matis ■  
schwitters ■  
milița PETRAȘCU ■  
Zarnover ■  
m. h. MAXY ■  
hans RICHTER ■  
charles TEIGE ■  
peri ■  
paul KLEE ■  
victor BRAUNER ■  
Kassak ■  
viking EGGELING ■  
BUHOLZ ■  
iosef PETERS ■  
DIDA ■  
ernest VOGENA ■  
HUER ■

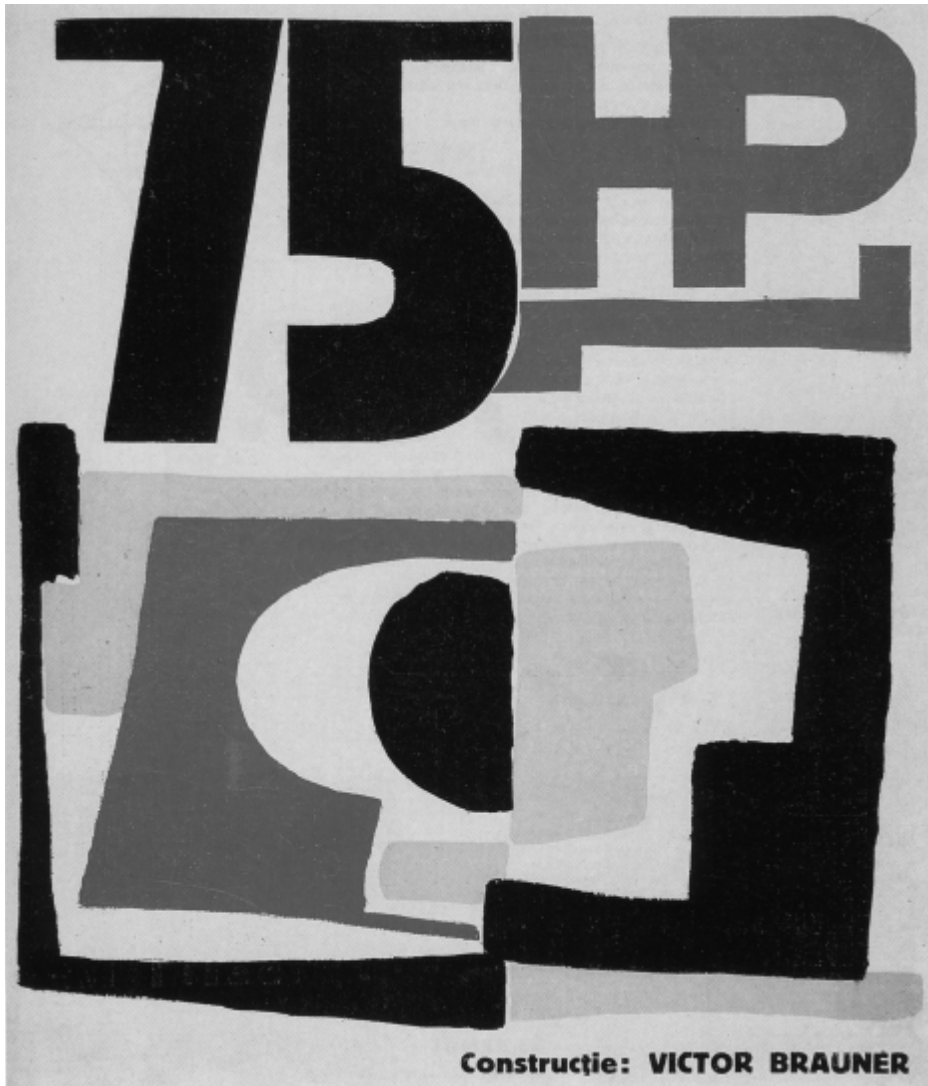
findings and contacts springs from an unfamiliar attitude of trying to defend one's own research field to the benefit of the national discourse. At the same time this attitude seems to signal that Romanian scholars, as well as other intellectuals, more than ten years after the "revolution" of 1989, are making all possible efforts to bridge the gap that the communists dug between themselves and those cultural expressions that characterized the times before World War I and the interwar period. But if today—aware, for instance, that most if not all of the members of the avant-garde were Jews and therefore were categorized as "foreigners" in their own homeland—one still allows oneself to explain that the tendency of the avant-garde to artistically extreme solutions and a pronounced modernism didn't have a solid basis in contemporary "Romanian civilization,"<sup>2</sup> one must also be prepared for accusations of anti-Semitism, especially when the avant-garde is labeled as antagonistic toward those "spiritual ideals" which contemporary national culture tried to express.

The avant-garde was counteracted not only by the communists but also by the conservative and right-wing establishment already long before the communist assumption of power. The years which the Romanian community of scholars have had since 1989 to make up for the lost years have been astonishingly fruitful in showing how both the avant-gardist efforts and those cultural modes of expressions which followed, for instance the magazine *Contimporanul*, were fought against and literally swept under the carpet by a communist dictatorship of more than forty years. Perhaps the most devoted expression of the newly awakened interest in the Romanian avant-garde was the magnificent exhibition that Alexandru Beldiman, Magda Cârneci, and Mihai Oroveanu staged at Artexpo in Bucharest in 1994, together with a great number of cultural institutions, which was supplemented by an unusually extensive catalogue in Romanian, English, and French.<sup>3</sup> This first inventory of the Romanian avant-garde from 1920 to the 1940s was directly connected with a special issue in English of the magazine *Romanian Review*, published the year before,<sup>4</sup> and was followed by a special issue of *Plural* edited by Petre Răileanu and published by the Romanian Cultural Foundation in 1999<sup>5</sup> (four years after the French version in the foundation's book series *Le Rameau d'Or*).<sup>6</sup> Two years after the Artexpo exhibition, the scholars Anca Bocăneț and Dana Herbay were given the responsibility of organizing a big exhibition, including a catalogue,<sup>7</sup> at the National Museum of Art in Bucharest commemorating the birth of Marcel Janco in 1896. The catalogue is a kind of domestic



FIGURE 1.4

Victor Brauner,  
cover for *75HP*, 1924.



complement to the German scholar Harry Seiwert's doctoral thesis on Marcel Janco, published in 1993.<sup>8</sup> The Romanian scholar and publisher Nicolae Țone's efforts are also remarkable expressions of the new interest.<sup>9</sup> From the period before the communist takeover in 1947 we find, among other minor contributions, Sașa Pană's compilation of Tristan Tzara's early poems in the collection *Primele poeme*, published in 1934,<sup>10</sup> which was fundamentally important for Michael H. Impey and Brian Swann when translating the poems into English in 1976.<sup>11</sup> The introduction by Impey was later also published in Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka's *The Eastern Dada Orbit* in 1996.<sup>12</sup> Tzara's first unedited poems are collected in the facsimile that was published by the Museum of Romanian Literature in Bucharest in 1996.<sup>13</sup> Concerning Arthur Segal and his early years in Romania the best contribution is Amelia Pavel's essay in the catalogue of the Kölnischer Kunstverein in connection with an exhibition in 1987 which was shown in Berlin, as well as in Regensburg, Ascona, and Tel Aviv.<sup>14</sup> Another valuable companion in my research has been the catalogue of the big exhibition "Between Worlds" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2002, especially the sourcebook.<sup>15</sup>

My own work and interest in the Romanian pre-Dada currents started as I was writing the book *Kärlek och Dada*,<sup>16</sup> a book in Swedish about Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, their complicated love affair, the inauguration of Cabaret Voltaire, and the dadaists of the Meierei. Like many others, I dutifully noted that both Tristan Tzara and the Janco brothers were born and grew up in Romania and that they had participated in predadaist activities in Bucharest already some years before they moved to Zurich, but without reflecting more closely upon the implications of their Romanian background. During the summer of 1996 I suddenly found myself standing on the platform of Gara de Nord in Bucharest without knowing that this was the very same railway station from which the young Tristan Tzara took a train during the autumn of 1915, when he had to leave Romania as fast as possible because of a family scandal apparently the same day or the day before. Invited by Stefan Constantinescu, at that time a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, I found myself in one of the most shabby capitals in Europe, once praised for its unbelievable beauty and charm as "the Paris of the Balkans," characterized by both Oriental grandeur and French esprit, now more or less destroyed by communist "planning." Half a year after this

first giddy visit, I curiously turned over the pages of Tristan Tzara's manuscripts at the Museum of Romanian Literature on Bulevardul Dacia thanks to the Romanian scholar Ruxandra Mihăilă, a white-haired, untiring old lady who whispered stories in my ears of the Jewish rabbis dressed in black cassocks and the Russian peasants in the dusty streets of Czernowitz in Bukovina, at the same time bringing me one manuscript after the other, and book after magazine. Another six months later I had, thanks to Ileana Stanculescu, a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest acting as translator, forced myself through the bureaucratic obstacles blocking the passage to the card index, the book shelves, the magazines, the collections of manuscripts, and the one and only copying machine of the library of the Romanian Academy. Nothing was made easier by the fact that I had to show all my letters of recommendation from all kinds of universities in both Sweden and Finland to all kinds of clerks and doorkeepers until I stood in front of the fifteen-year-old copying machine guarded by a chain-smoking lady who proved to be the absolute opposite to Ms. Mihăilă in regard to her willingness to help a foreign scholar. Yet another year later, Ileana's most magnificent achievement thus far had got me into the Romanian national archive, but in spite of the laborious preparations the visit was amazingly meager or even without any useful results, due either to the clerks' ill-concealed aversion to helping me or simply to the imperfect card index and the nonexistent register regarding, for instance, the family background of Tristan Tzara and the Janco brothers. The archives of the Jewish communities in Bucharest behind Piața Unirii proved to be much better.

Due to my inadequate knowledge of Romanian and to the practical circumstances, it would be presumptuous to claim that this "report" is more than a more or less essayistic sounding of the Romanian context, and at the same time a reminder of the need for further research. If anyone is to blame for possible misunderstandings and factual errors, it is me and nobody else.

There are too many people to whom I would like to express my deepest thanks. Undoubtedly the most important person during the work on this book has been Manuela Anton, scholar and translator of most of the texts and other written resources, without which there wouldn't have been any actual research. Thanks to the speed and the convenience of e-mail we achieved together something that I person-

ally had thought was totally impossible, standing on the platform of Gara de Nord facing my own prejudices and the misery of Bucharest. Others who have helped me with translations are Lionel Sabiescu, Arina Stoenescu, and Erik van der Heeg. I thank also all those who have helped me in various ways with everything possible and impossible during my visits to Bucharest and Romania, especially Stefan Constantinescu, Dan and Lia Perjovschi, and Iosif Kiraly. I wish to extend my thanks also to my wife Ann Edholm, as good as any in numerous discussions during the process of making this book. Financially my research was made possible by the Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation in Stockholm, the central commission of scholarships in Finland, the Swedish Institute in Stockholm, and the Swedish Association of Authors. Thank you all. It would also have been impossible to complete this book without financial help from the University College of Arts, Crafts, and Design in Stockholm: thank you. Last but not least, many thanks to Matthew Abbate at the MIT Press for checking my language, among other things.

*Ex oriente Dada*—Dada comes from the East.



In Romania *and*  
**SWITZERLAND**

2



Suddenly something happens. Suddenly a deafening clamor bursts out in the silence of the valley as the grotesque procession comes closer and closer to the small square of the Moldavian village. The procession consists of up to fifty young boys and men from ten to thirty years of age, all dressed up in more or less bizarre costumes and masks in line with the characters the boys play in the *colinde* play.<sup>1</sup> This noisy play takes place in the villages every year around Christmas and New Year and may last for more than one week. The procession is accompanied by a handful of drummers and fiddlers doing everything possible to outdo the mostly improvised songs and the roaring exchange of words between the characters. Some of the boys dressed in long black coats and trousers made of sheepskin look like old men, making all kinds of faces with the help of their scrubby beards of straw and long glistening noses of red goatskin; others play the part of soldiers dressed in long white shirts held up by broad belts and with a cap on their heads recalling the Oriental fez. Some appear as princes and princesses, ladies in waiting, Arabs, and Gypsies, others play the part of Jews and Jewesses, priests and prelates. In the middle of the roaring, screaming crowd the devil himself is dancing and twisting around like a fool dressed in a tight black costume, his face covered with a hairy mask. At the devil's heels comes the old lady with a fez on her gray hair and carrying a spinning wheel in her belt. Father Bercu is provided with a big hump made of rags under a big many-colored peasant blouse together with a black hat covered with foxtails. His face is hidden behind a mask made of black goatskin with long temple curls and a beard made of horsehair. In his hand he holds his "rosary" consisting of a bundle of wooden sticks with which he grandly blesses those standing close to him, while at the same time far and wide he tells of his latest business affairs, of course in "Jewish" jargon which nobody understands. Suddenly the wife of the priest is robbed by the devil, who then is chased by the priest until the priest bumps into the stranger, who catches hold of his beard, at which the priest furiously begins to hit the man with every possible tool. Finally the southerner separates the fighters, assisted by a crowd of screaming Arabs with thick knotted sticks above their heads.

Almost at the head of the procession the *bloj* looks like a clown, a buffoon, a kind of fool or jolly fellow making grotesque movements and crying out totally "senseless" exclamations, thus producing hilarious mirth among the villagers. The boy is dressed in colorful women's clothes; around his neck he carries a cowbell and

he drags a sack of ashes, with which he hits the face of anyone coming too close to him. On his head he wears a goatskin looking like a big bellows with holes for the eyes; furthermore he has a gorgeous false nose, enormous black false moustaches, and a false beard. The leader of the procession is the *mosul de turca* holding the *turca* mask in his hand above his head while brandishing a wooden sword in his other hand. With a calabash on his head the leader plays the part of an old man dressed in a hand-woven carpet and gaudy flags. The *turca* mask, a sort of antlered deer's head, is placed on the end of a long stick; it can produce a high clattering sound while the player dances and utters noisy fragments of songs and absurd lines and words.

Reaching the square, the *turca* leader dances for the last time before one of the boys steps out from the procession to shoot the leader with a wooden rifle. The leader falls to the ground screaming in pain, rises with obvious difficulty, and tries to stumble along before the next bullet hits him in the chest. He is dead after six or seven shots, and suddenly two boys dressed as a priest and his wife come to bury the leader. When the wife discovers that there are no weepers at hand, she herself undertakes the necessary task, kneels to the ground and begins her sweeping, sad lamentation. The dead man on the stretcher is carried into the house, which the company has had at its disposal since the play began, the masks are put in one of the corners with their faces against the wall, and everybody, including the villagers, sits down at the table loaded with food and drinks, while the *bloj* continues with his obscene jokes and impossible tricks.

Not far away—in Botoșani some ten miles to the north near the border of Ukraine—a company of amateur actors from the local Jewish community is gathering together outside one of the many synagogues of the small town in order to give a play written by the tremendously popular Avram Goldfaden,<sup>2</sup> the founder of the Jewish theater in Iași, the capital of Moldavia. At the same time the zaddik, the wise old master and rabbi of the congregation, is finishing the sermon inside the synagogue celebrating the end of the Sabbath. The ecstatic song, which sounds both absurd and totally senseless in the ears of the few Christians of the town, sweeps over the boisterous company in the courtyard, where the actors are building their stage of simple, “cubist” coulisses and other properties needed for the play: gaily colored trees, fronts, wooden towers and pinnacles, sunburnt mountains and refreshing oases. A Gothic



arch represents a synagogue. The play may begin; the powerful hero and liberator Bar-Kochba says farewell to his beloved in an aria both touching and at the same time uncontrollably comic. A tremendously horrifying Turkish army of three men in gaudy cloaks steps onto the provisional stage chanting and marching in perfect time, the actors are screaming and weeping, singing and fighting, running and jumping—and the Jewish people is once again released from the dreadful Babylonian captivity.

Sweaty and cheerfully joking with the audience, the actors are replacing the mountains and the fortress with a many-colored facade and transforming the arch into the simple study of Jakob Gordin's play about God, man, and the devil. God and the devil are betting whether the devil can manage to mislead and seduce the poor and enormously pious Torah copyist Herschel of Dubrowno. The devil offers him a huge amount of money, making him into a wealthy manufacturer of prayer mantels. Herschel divorces his beloved but childless wife and marries Nichte, a woman as beautiful as the stars in the night desert, deceives his fellow merchants, and lays hands on riches after riches. But his soul is filled with agony and forces him to rove about from land to land, from town to town, from village to village. His father, a jester and a clown, falls into drunkenness, Herschel leaves his family, and, when the son of one of his best friends is crushed to death under one of his looms, Herschel hangs himself in his prayer mantel, from which blood drips onto his coffer full of golden coins, precious stones, and jewels. His has committed the most dreadful crime for a Jew, suicide, and is consequently forced to atone for this with his own death—and the devil has once again lost the combat.

The audience takes a breather, and from behind the black curtain stretched between two wooden trestles the impassioned young Löwy appears for the last time together with the cunning and always intriguing Piepes, the brutally humorous Mr. Tschisik and his high-chested wife, the always brooding, gloomy Mrs. Rosenstein, and the chubby, comic Mrs. Kluge—an uncontrollable cacophony makes the ground shiver, and the audience cries for joy and laughter. Suddenly a man dressed in a black cassock stumbles in, walking on high stilts while singing a song without words, a song that sounds like a humming “ay-ay-ay-ay” or like “shiri-bim-bom-bom” and which soon turns into the well-known and most popular song about the rabbi who invites a freethinker to his table in order to mock this “philosopher” for his interest in steamships and air balloons; such worldly inventions and devices don't attract the pious

rabbi, who himself, naturally, is able to walk on water and without difficulty climb up to heaven on his own—and the gloomy everyday life is transformed into a fantastic play where everything is as possible as impossible, where the truth is a lie and the lie true, where everybody can perform any miracle whenever and wherever, where one madness after the other is as possible as probable, and where the man who is walking with his head in the clouds—*der Luftmensch*—is the one who stands more firmly on the ground than anybody else, happy and unhappy at the same time, a realist and a dreamer, skeptic and visionary, a man who sees the logic in the madness and the madness in the logic, the man for whom the relationship with the absurd is a way of living and for whom absurdity itself is the ultimate meaning of life, just as Sholem Aleichem cites the Talmud: “Askakurdo dimaskanto dikarnaso disfarsmakhto.”

While the play is going on in Botoșani, an improbably lonely man sits at one of the tables of the restaurant Bufetul in the center of Bucharest, bluntly looking at the street outside and the rich men’s villas along the broad Kiseleff avenue, remembers his years of hard work as an underpaid secretary and lawyer in the provincial towns of Tulcea and Țirgovîște, thanks God for his new position as judge of the supreme court of appeal in Bucharest, sips some wine and writes busily one more short story to read to his mother and sister, who apparently are more than pleased to listen to the curious stories. Sadly he remembers also how he along with the writer Gheorghe Ciprian, after a night of heavy drinking, took an open cab and ordered the driver to turn to the left, always to the left, until the driver, dressed in shimmering velvet and red silk cords, became furious. He also remembers how he went not so long ago to a gentlemen’s outfitter, ordered the shopkeeper to take out costume after costume, tried on one after the other, only to leave the shop in an indescribable chaos, without buying anything of course; and how he—once again in the company of Ciprian—went to the market square just behind the Ateneul to buy a hen in order to drive along the streets in a cab with the hen in his arms, screaming and crying, until the two friends decided to toss the hen right in the face of the indignant pedestrians in Calea Victoriei, Bucharest’s most fashionable street crowded with equally fashionable people.

Mr. Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău<sup>3</sup> is the humble official who lives as he writes his unrestrainedly grotesque stories. Now it is about the shopkeeper Algazy, a nice old

man with a toothless smile, his beard trimmed and silky, neatly laid out on a grill that is screwed under his chin and surrounded by barbed wire; besides his usual store duties, he experiences the greatest delight whenever he harnesses himself to a barrow and, trailed by his associate Mr. Grummer at a distance of two yards, runs at a strong clip in the dust and the heat of the sun through the rural communities to collect old rugs, oil cans with holes in them, and, especially, ankle bones which he eats, all at the same time, past midnight, in the most lurid silence. As you enter the store a delicious scent tickles your nostrils . . . you are met on the staircase by an honest boy on whose head is dyed cordage instead of hair; you are then amiably greeted by Algazy and invited to sit down on a low stool, while Grummer is lying in ambush, casting sidelong, cunning glances; he first sticks out his beak which he sharpens ostentatiously on a gutter especially mounted on the counter edge, and it is only then that he reveals himself at full length. Now it's about the good old friends Ismail and Turnavitu, the latter being but a simple air fan in the various dirty Greek coffee-houses of Bucharest. Unable to stand the odor he was forced to breathe in those places, he went into politics for a long period of time, after which he was taken care of by Ismail, whom he met at an evening dance party, turning him into a pair of eyes and side whiskers. One of the fantastic stories is about Gayk, the only civilian in town with a rifle, carried on his left shoulder. He believes, of course, in being prepared against any eventuality, which is why he sleeps only in tails and white gloves with a diplomatic letter tucked under his pillow, a respectable quantity of tack, and . . . a machine gun. In daytime Gayk can stand no other garment but a small drape with festooned trim, one in front and one in the back, easily pulled aside by anybody with his permission. Unfortunately his niece, a hard-working and conscientious girl, declares war on Gayk, a war in which they are engaged for more than three years and over a front that is almost seven hundred kilometers long. They are fighting with great heroism, but in the end Gayk having been made marshal on the battlefield and finding no military outfitter to put his new stripes on, decides not to fight any more and asks for peace. They hold their first exchange of prisoners at the cash register of the theater of operations and get moderate prices for them. Yet another short story tells about the shopkeeper Cotadi dressed in an armorlike garment of laths which binds him terribly but which he wears with absolute self-denial next to his skin under the tasseled peasant shirt he never takes off; he loves to draw an occasional customer

into a discussion that is initially pleasant but which becomes more and more animated until he succeeds in being talked back to at least once, upon which he responds to his interlocutor with several powerful blows on the floor with the edge of a piano lid that is screwed on his back just above his buttocks and which is set in motion on such occasions, utterly confounding his customers and striking holy fear into the less brave ones. His best friend is Dragomir, an old schoolmate, very long, crooked, with round and very mobile eyes, with two fine locks of hair shining black like a crow's feathers, hanging about three inches over his beveled nape and letting two clear drops of French oil drip at their tips.



**FIGURE 2.1**

Mr. Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău,  
alias Urmuz.

Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău completes his story, looks again at the avenue where the traffic has decreased to only a cab or two slowly driving north to the lake district outside Bucharest. It is already getting dark and the judge collects the papers filled with writing and eventually writes down the hypothetical title *Futuristic Stories and Novellas*. The title is a kind of homage to the day several years ago—in 1909—when he caught sight of a newspaper in Craiova,<sup>4</sup> which turned out to contain a curious “manifesto” on its first page written by an Italian joker and provocateur, together with a short introduction and an open letter to the jester written by the paper’s editor. No, the man couldn’t be in his right senses, nevertheless he expressed some interesting opinions in saying that the essential elements of poetry must be courage, audacity, and revolt and that literature must be characterized not by “magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy, and slumber,” as heretofore, but by movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist. Well, maybe so, but didn’t the mad Italian go a bit too far in claiming that a racing automobile and a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire are more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace? Didn’t he go too far in claiming that beauty exists only in struggle and that war is the only cure for the world, that the new poets must glorify militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman? Well, this too may be said, but is it really necessary—as the manifesto recommends—to get rid of those innumerable museums that cover the country with innumerable cemeteries, those Calvaries of crucified dreams, those registers of false starts suitable only for the dying, for invalids and for prisoners? How is this possible in a country lacking both museums and academies, in a country which, after centuries of Ottoman power, has only now been able to build its future within the European family?

But on the other hand, what is not possible in a country where even the coachman waiting outside, like his colleagues, belongs to an obscure Russian sect that has been deported from its own country and whose faith demands that he must castrate himself after his first child has been born, a country where the officers wear both salmon-pink and baby-blue uniforms and sit in the coffeehouses drinking ice tea and eating puff pastry cakes all day long while waving at the crowd of women in the streets, an army of coquettes, the one more vulgar than the other, with red and pink powder in their faces? What is not possible in a country where the capital does



FIGURE 2.2

Calea Victoriei, Bucharest, in 1931.

Muzeul Municipiului, Bucharest.

everything possible to look like Paris though the king is a prince of the house of Hohenzollern and the nobility a carryover from the Ottomans? Indeed, what is not possible in a country where all the rouge of the generously painted women, and the officers as well, would be enough to turn the Black Sea into the Red Sea and where the army has ordered its officers not to bring their makeup boxes to the front? A country which—as foreign observers claim<sup>5</sup>—stinks of those millions upon millions of lei and dollars that the scoundrels of the upper class, living in Paris, Vienna, or at the French Riviera, have raked in by throwing themselves like wolves on the oil wells or by exploiting all the enormous territories where the peasants are working to death for next to nothing, while the shop windows are filled with jewels at prices as high as those in Monte Carlo and the Gypsy bands are playing in the overcrowded open-air restaurants that kind of rhythmic music that must be just as intoxicating as those strong drinks that each and every artist and writer is gulping down at Casa Capşa, the restaurant where the elite puts itself on public display and where all the big and important questions of the nation are discussed and solved, every day, every hour around the clock? What is not possible in a country where the government does everything possible to imitate the Belgian one, where the royal palace looks like a French town hall surrounded by a pompous small garden, and where every intellectual claims that the country is the true heir of the great Roman Empire, a country where a new political party is born every hour of the day in the nearest coffee shop and where all the daily newspapers are owned by the party leaders, of whom the richest of all is said to be so far in favor of everything French that he sends his laundry to Paris, while others are trimming their sails according to the mistress in vogue? A country where the bourgeoisie consequently speaks French while employing English children's nurses and governesses and furnishing its villas in the style of Louis Quinze, the lounges, the dining rooms, and the libraries looking like British gentlemen's clubs, where they drink light wines and sweet champagne in the small hours of the morning while devoting themselves to endless orgies of talk characterized by the fact that nobody is listening to anybody because everybody speaks at the same time?

What is not possible in a country whose capital appears mostly like a confusing piling up of overlapping events with neither consequences nor logic, where every fragment expresses the city's disrupted identity? A country where a river, which

mostly looks like a big muddy ditch, runs through the capital, a river surrounded by high weed-covered embankments on the top of which ramshackle buildings and houses are leaning against each other trying to hide their own misery as best they can, at the same time as the walls facing the street are covered by many-colored carpets as though their main task was to signal that this is the very spot where West meets East?

What is not possible in a country where people consider themselves born under a tragic sign, forever clashing against modern progress, at the same time believing like Orpheus that only songs and poems can change and improve the world and unite them in a beautiful and more human reality? Where each and every poet is convinced that poetry is the art of the impossible as much as an ontological wound, while at the same time they are copying, without restraint, whichever French symbolist's timbre is elegant and melodious enough? Where the country's leading poet is sitting in the drawing room on a skillfully decorated throne in front of mysteriously fluttering candlesticks surrounded by devoted fans and poor imitators, to whom the renowned poet donates tremendously beautiful rings, sparkling diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones, of which all—of course—are false, at the same time as he defines true poetry as the chaos of the spirit, a cry of distress and mad laughter?

What is not possible in a country where the soul of its people is said to be reflected in and characterized by a song—the *doina* of folk poetry—which always begins with an "Oooh," which then ends in the voice dying out in silence? What is not possible in a country characterized by its *mahala* mentality, a kind of Oriental petit bourgeois attitude focused only on business, power, and political plots? The country which claims to be Latin but which has an Orthodox religion and an Orthodox church paradoxically paying respect to the pope in Rome? A country where the Oriental influence is reflected in the incompetence of the road builders and the skillfulness of the violinists and where the monasteries and the churches are meeting places of Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance, Cistercian monks and Russian holy fools? A country that is a conglomerate of influences coming from all four points of the compass, a melting pot of different cultures and civilizations complementing each other, a crossroads for peoples, experiences, and events, a focal point of cultural compromises and violent confrontations?



In the same afternoon as Mr. Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău is sitting in the dining room of the Bufetul in Bucharest, a listless young Romanian student<sup>6</sup> is walking down the alleys of old Zurich dreaming of a job that would improve his poor finances and at the same time would give him a chance to study full-time at the institute of technology—the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule—and to devote himself to his newly started artistic career. More than one and a half years have already passed since he got off the train at the Hauptbahnhof, not yet twenty, together with his brother Iuliu a year younger, to try his fortune, like thousands of others during the ongoing war, in the city that more than any other in Europe attracts people from the whole continent, not only thanks to Swiss neutrality but also because of the rumor that Zurich has gathered together most of the European intellectual elite, artists, writers, journalists, and actors, together with less-known and unknown cabaret and music hall artists, professional revolutionaries, anarchists, bohemians, and all kinds of other individuals more or less lost in life, all escaping the misery of the war. At the beginning of their stay in Zurich the brothers could still count on financial support from their family in Bucharest, although a third brother—George—joined them in September 1915, but because the war soon cut them off from the family, they have simply had to look for other possible sources of income. Marcel Iancu has tried to sell some of his paintings, but in fact he has had no opportunities whatsoever because of his lack of contacts in the unfamiliar city; the brothers consequently have decided to try the cabarets and the innumerable restaurants—Iuliu is not a bad piano player, while Marcel has a good singing voice.

This afternoon Marcel Iancu—who already uses the more Western European version of his name Janco like his brothers, who have changed their first names to Jules and Georges—has already strolled along Limmatquai and entered the medieval center of the city with its winding streets and alleys, small squares and tiny churches, all climbing up to the Hirschengraben, and has entered the Großmünster-platz in front of the Zwingli cathedral and walked some hundred meters along the Münster-gasse. Just where the street changes its name to Niederdorfstraße he suddenly hears beautiful piano music streaming from the restaurant in the corner of the Spiegel-gasse: it must be a piece by Tchaikovsky. Soon he can discern in the dusky hall a “gothic figure” sitting at the piano doing everything possible to entertain the few beer-drinking customers, while a woman as ravishing as she is obviously shabby is nailing



FIGURE 2.3

Marcel Janco,

*Cabaret Voltaire*, 1916.

Archiv Arche Verlag,

Zurich and Hamburg.

FIGURE 2.4

Marcel Slodki, poster for  
Cabaret Voltaire, 1916.



**Künstlerkneipe Voltaire**  
**Allabendlich** (mit Ausnahme von Freitag)  
**Musik-Vorträge und Rezitationen**

Eröffnung Samstag den 5. Februar  
im Saale der „Malererei“ Spiegelgasse 1

some strange posters onto the wall and some men or boys in black are stretching a ragged cloth between two wooden trestles behind the piano.

No, it is not impossible nor even unlikely that Marcel Janco, here at the restaurant Meierei, runs across a twenty-years-older countryman, the artist Aron Sigalu<sup>7</sup> from Moldavian Botoșani, known in both Munich and Berlin under the name of Arthur Segal and now on a short visit to Zurich. Sigalu, who has exhibited during the previous year in Mannheim, Bremen, Berlin, Tokyo, Chemnitz, and Leipzig as well as in both Dresden and Cologne, has traveled up to Zurich, encouraged by his friend Hans Arp, from the open-air paradise of Ascona down in Tessin to install some of his latest paintings and prints on the walls of the Meierei, among original pieces and reproductions not only by his friend Wassily Kandinsky but also by artists like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Otto Baumberg, Augusto Giacometti, Edwin Keller, and Otto van Rees. Despite his participation, Arthur Segal keeps himself for the most part in the background and seems unusually reserved for some reason.

Apparently something decisive is going to happen, the atmosphere is feverish and vibrates with tension, the man at the piano stands up every now and then and gives loud, almost screaming orders to the others, who hammer and nail like madmen, run to and fro, turn over loose papers and rehearse recitations of seemingly senseless poems, at the same time as the shabby woman with shiny black fringe, lips red like fire and eyes painted in black, tries to sing some street ballads while the customers shake their heads and mutter something about crazy foreigners. Some Russian emigrants bring in the instruments of a whole balalaika orchestra while a Ukrainian artist—Marcel Slodki—nails a cubist poster onto the wall outside, a poster that tells the potential audience that the restaurant, in fact, has been transformed into a “Künstlerkneipe” which is about to open the same evening of 5 February 1916 and which has been named Cabaret Voltaire; Slodki is a small, dark, and extraordinarily shy painter who walks around dressed in an indescribably dirty gray costume, certainly the dirtiest in the entire city.<sup>8</sup>

This is the opportunity the three Romanian students have been waiting for, especially Marcel Janco, who already as a seventeen-year-old pupil in the upper secondary school in Bucharest was engaged in subversive literary activities that infuriated the cultural establishment of the city’s bourgeoisie and made the little circle to which he belonged appear like an ally of the “continental” symbolists, of those

Romanian poets of the day who explicitly refused to speak “in the interest of the Romanian nation and the Romanian people” but devoted themselves to *l’art pour l’art* aesthetics and intra-artistic tune-ups, blank poetry, and other provocations. As if by pure chance, one of the others responsible for the activities in Bucharest—perhaps the most important of them all—happens to live at the same Pension Altinger in 21 Fraumünsterstraße<sup>9</sup> as the Janco brothers, namely the nineteen-year-old “Samy” Samuel Rosenstock, alias Tristan Tzara from Moinești only some ten miles south of Iași and Botoșani, and he must—of course—immediately be informed of what is happening at the Meierei. At the outbreak of the war in 1914 Zurich practically overnight became the center of the European intellectual elite, the place of refuge for innumerable writers and artists, one more interesting than the next; everybody was welcome, and Zurich rapidly became the focal point of the international avant-garde, of French, German, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Yugoslavian, and Italian artists, writers, actors, nihilists, anarchists, bohemians, among them, for instance, James Joyce, Romain Rolland, Alexander Archipenko, Franz Werfel, Else Lasker-Schüler, Fritz Brupbacher, Otto Flake, Rudolf von Laban, Viking Eggeling, Francis Picabia; and everybody now is sitting at the tables of either Café de la Terrasse or Café Odéon, both on Rämistraße, if they are not sitting in one of the smoky beer houses along Limmatquai. But still the life of pleasure is modest, provincial, and limited, as are the possibilities of putting claims of new artistic and literary achievements; the city is small, too small, and loneliness is the companion of every refugee. Cabaret Voltaire promises to be a real remedy. Once and for all a new artistic movement is to constitute itself in little Zurich, a new “ontological” attitude, never seen or experienced before. World history is to take another turn—thanks to five Romanians feeling lonely in the crowded city.

The preparations for the big event were still going on when the landlord Jan Ephraim opened the doors of the restaurant Meierei and Dada entered the artistic stage of Cabaret Voltaire. All witnesses, both contemporary and later, agree upon the feverish atmosphere in the small restaurant hall and that the stage at the end of the hall was still being “decorated” when the cabaret was to begin, even though Hugo Ball and

his beloved Emmy Hennings had been enough prepared to let Marcel Slodki draw his cubist poster while they had published perhaps the most famous press notice in the history of art and literature in the *Zürcher Allgemeine Zeitung*:

*Cabaret Voltaire. Under this name a group of young artists and writers has formed with the object of becoming a center for artistic entertainment. The Cabaret Voltaire will be run on the principle of daily meetings where visiting artists will perform their music and poetry. The young artists of Zurich are invited to bring along their ideas and contributions.*<sup>10</sup>

Finally Hugo Ball, a former playwright at the Kammerspiele in Munich, writer, and piano player, had succeeded in founding a literary cabaret of his own together with Emmy Hennings, a captivating music hall artist and celebrated singer in both Munich and Berlin, as well as in Moscow, Warsaw, and Budapest. The restaurant, or rather the beer house, was overcrowded and many had to stand for want of seats. About six o'clock, while the organizers were still hammering and installing "futurist" posters, a "deputation of four small men looking Oriental" emerged, according to Hugo Ball's diary *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*<sup>11</sup> (published more than ten years after the actual event), with folders and pictures in their arms, again and again tactfully bowing to the audience. They presented themselves as Marcel Janco, the painter, Tristan Tzara, Georges Janco, and a fourth gentleman whose name Hugo Ball could not catch but who must have been either Jules Janco or Arthur Segal. Indeed, the statements of what actually happened that first night differ a lot, and many of those who claimed that they remembered that particular night in February, even in detail, may in fact have been reconstructing the repertoire of the whole first week up to 11 February, the day when Richard Huelsenbeck, urgently requested by Hugo Ball, joined the company at the Meierei and thus accomplished a kind of paradigm shift by consciously giving the repertoire a more provocative touch than before. According to Ball,<sup>12</sup> Tristan Tzara gave his first performance already on the first evening when he read "traditional-style" poems, poems that he fished out of his various coat pockets "in a rather charming way" and which in the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire*,<sup>13</sup> published only a few months later, are described as "Romanian." Emmy Hennings tells us in her autobiography *Ruf und Echo*<sup>14</sup> that it was Tzara who was announced as the first to

perform on the small stage: a dark-haired Romanian, as beautiful as if he were in love, appeared from behind the curtain and picked from his pockets one creased scrap of paper after the other, almost childish words of parting in French which he distributed among the many customers and all of which ended in the languishing, beautiful refrain “Adieu, ma mère, adieu, mon père.” (According to Hugo Ball,<sup>15</sup> Tzara later read Max Jacob’s poem “La côte” on 28 February.) First we thought, says Emmy Hennings,<sup>16</sup> that this was a little boy running away from home and now expressing his homesickness in touching, resolute verses. Then the “gothic” Hugo Ball played piano while Emmy Hennings sang Aristide Bruant’s song “À la villette,” well known in cabaret circles, translated by Ferdinand Hardekopf. Marietta di Monaco read poems by Christian Morgenstern, Alfred Lichtenstein, Klabund, Gottfried Benn, and Georg Heym, the Russian balalaika orchestra of six men—the Revoluzzer Chor—assisted as the ensemble performed Ball’s *Totentanz*, a satirical paraphrase of one of the most popular street ballads during the war, and Hugo Ball himself read poems by Blaise Cendrars and Jakob van Hoddis.

After performing a familiar drinking song, Emmy Hennings went, dripping with perspiration, from table to table distributing postcards of herself, and while the stage was still illuminated indescribable gruntings, yells, and whistlings were heard from behind it together with furious hammer strokes that sounded like empty barrels rolling down the street. The curtain was drawn apart, the light went out, and a green spotlight was directed toward the small platform on which four strange figures were moving on high stilts against a backdrop painted in cubist style, all dressed in long grotesque masks hurriedly made by Marcel Janco. The masks looked horrible, ghastly pale, with round black holes instead of eyes, mouths without lips, snakelike curls winding down the polished crowns, and chins painted with red crosses like dripping blood. All four gave dreadful cries, louder and louder. One of the figures hissed like a steam engine an uninterrupted “sss,” another growled an incessant “prrr,” the third shouted a penetrating “muuuuh,” while the last sang a falsetto “ayayayayayay.” The dancelike performance became more and more ecstatic. Suddenly one of the figures opened his long dark coat, underneath which black suspenders could be seen holding stockings recalling the cancan dancers of Paris. Another one tore apart his coat, revealing a cuckoo clock at his chest. While the audience, furiously crying and stamping on the floor, expressed its rage and while the four figures, still shouting and loudly



FIGURE 2.5

The ensemble Maxim in Zurich,  
1915, with Hugo Ball and Emmy  
Hennings to the right. Schiller  
Nationalmuseum Deutsches  
Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.



chattering with each other, placed themselves in a row on the platform, a “curly young man looking like a foreigner”—Tristan Tzara—appeared on the stage dressed in tails and white spats and with a tiny pince-nez on his nose. Raising his graceful hands he politely invited the four masks to step back and at the same time began to read French verses without meaning. An indescribable murmur was heard from the round holes of the masks. Tzara continued as if in a trance. The grotesque oratorio went on until the audience finally fell into the refrain, thus producing a noise that the Russian revolutionary living just on the other side of the alley—among others—could not have been untouched by. In fact a young Romanian of the name of Marcu gave the impression that Lenin used to take his meals at the Meierei to “get to know what people are really talking about,”<sup>17</sup> while Marcel Janco<sup>18</sup> said that Lenin used to come to the cabaret quite often to discuss the dadaist ideas, ideas that he was very much opposed to because they could not serve the Communist cause. The noisy performance ended with Tzara picking up a roll of paper on which the indecent word “merde” was written.

As soon as Richard Huelsenbeck arrived from Berlin,<sup>19</sup> he expressed the necessity of “drumming literature into the ground,” as Hugo Ball wrote in his diary on 11 February.<sup>20</sup> According to him, Huelsenbeck’s poems, for instance those he published in *Phantastische Gebete* later that year, are nothing more than an attempt to “capture in a clear melody the totality of this unutterable age, with all its cracks and fissures, with all its wicked and lunatic genialities, with all its noise and hollow din: the Gorgon’s head of a boundless terror smiles out of the fantastic destruction.”<sup>21</sup> The entertaining elements of the Cabaret Voltaire repertoire, for which Emmy Hennings had been responsible more than anyone else, withdrew now in favor of more explicitly artistic and literary refashioned experiments in accordance with the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its transgressing qualities, poems of simultaneity, “negro songs,” masks, dance performances, and all those heaven-storming manifestos that were later so implacably connected to Dada in its capacity as an avant-garde movement, even though the term Dada itself had not yet been invented or found.

The performance of 9 March is a sort of overture. Huelsenbeck reads his own poems, gesticulating wildly with his cane, which, according to Ball, has a clearly elevating effect on the audience, who consider Huelsenbeck rude, arrogant, and pre-

sumptuous. The nostrils shiver, the eyebrows are raised, the mouth, around which an ironic twitch is playing, is tired but firm as he reads accompanied by a big drum, whistling, and laughter. But—as mentioned before—this is only the introduction. On 29 March the “big event” breaks out when Huelsenbeck is assisted by both Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco. For the first time all three give a performance together, reading a *poème simultané*, which, according to Ball in the diary the day after,<sup>22</sup> is a “contrapunctal” recitative in which three or more voices speak, sing, and whistle at the same time in such a way that the elegiac, humorous, or bizarre content of the piece is brought out by these combinations. In such a simultaneous poem, Ball continues, the willful quality of an organic work is given powerful expression, and so is its limitation by the accompaniment—an “rrrrrr” drawn out for minutes, or crashes, or sirens, superior to the human voice in energy. After this poem of simultaneity two “negro songs” follow, of which the first is especially well rehearsed. Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Janco, all dressed in black capes and equipped with small and big exotic drums, enter the stage simultaneously, bow like a yodeling company celebrating the lakes and the forests, take out their sheets of music, and begin to yell their poems right in the face of the panic-stricken audience. Huelsenbeck recites “Ahoi, ahoi! Des Admirals qwirktes Beinkleid schnell zefällt,” while Tzara is crying blue murder: “Boumboum boum Il Deshabilla sa chair quand les grenouilles humides commencèrent à bruler . . .”. During the rhythmic breaks between the verses, Huelsenbeck hits the big bass drum and sings “hihiyaboumm” while Tzara, playing castanet, continuously repeats “rougebleau” and Janco gives a hissing-concert. Occasionally all three cry “ooooo” or “prxxa chrraz” or “zimzim uralla uralla zimzim zanzibar zimzallazam.”

The scandal is total—a new revolutionary art is born.

The hectic activities during the spring, including the publication of the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire* with contributions by both its official publisher Hugo Ball and, among others, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Richard Huelsenbeck, can be said to have reached their climax partly in the joint performance of Ball’s “bruitist concert” *Ein Krippenspiel* at the Meierei on 3 June,<sup>23</sup> partly in the big Dada soirée at Zunfthaus zur Waag on 14 July, which the illustrious company had rented after it had to close Cabaret Voltaire and leave the Meierei; according to



with the troupe presenting its entire artistic and literary spectrum including everything from the movement's first manifesto to "poems without words," "negro songs," and dramatic performances where the participants dressed up in one fantastic outfit after another, masks and strange dresses. On this occasion Ball's "bishop episode"<sup>26</sup> also took place, with which he retired from what he came to see as the mad "practical jokes" and unnecessarily absurd performances of Dada. It is certainly true that Ball had already performed on the stage of the Meierei in white gloves and an overcoat reaching down to the floor, together with a cylindrical tube on his head on the top of which he had placed a black top hat and on which he had painted the number thirteen, but now he appeared in full figure as the "bishop" of Dada. According to the diary,<sup>27</sup> he himself had constructed the famous bishop's dress, but there is obvious reason to believe<sup>28</sup> that the strange costume, as well as the masks used in previous performances, was in fact made by the Romanian Marcel Janco. Ball's legs were covered with a cothurnus of luminous blue cardboard which reached up to his hips so that he looked, according to the diary, like an obelisk. Above that he wore a huge cardboard collar that was scarlet inside and gold outside. This was fastened at the throat in such a manner that he was able to move it like wings by raising and dropping his elbows. In addition he wore a high top hat striped with blue and white. Emmy Hennings too was dressed in a specially made outfit, performing a Dada dance in a cardboard tube from top to toe; according to Suzanne Perrottet,<sup>29</sup> one of the co-dancers, she covered her face with a horrible mask and her arms with cardboard reaching down to the long stylized fingers. Most likely this costume was made by Janco as well.

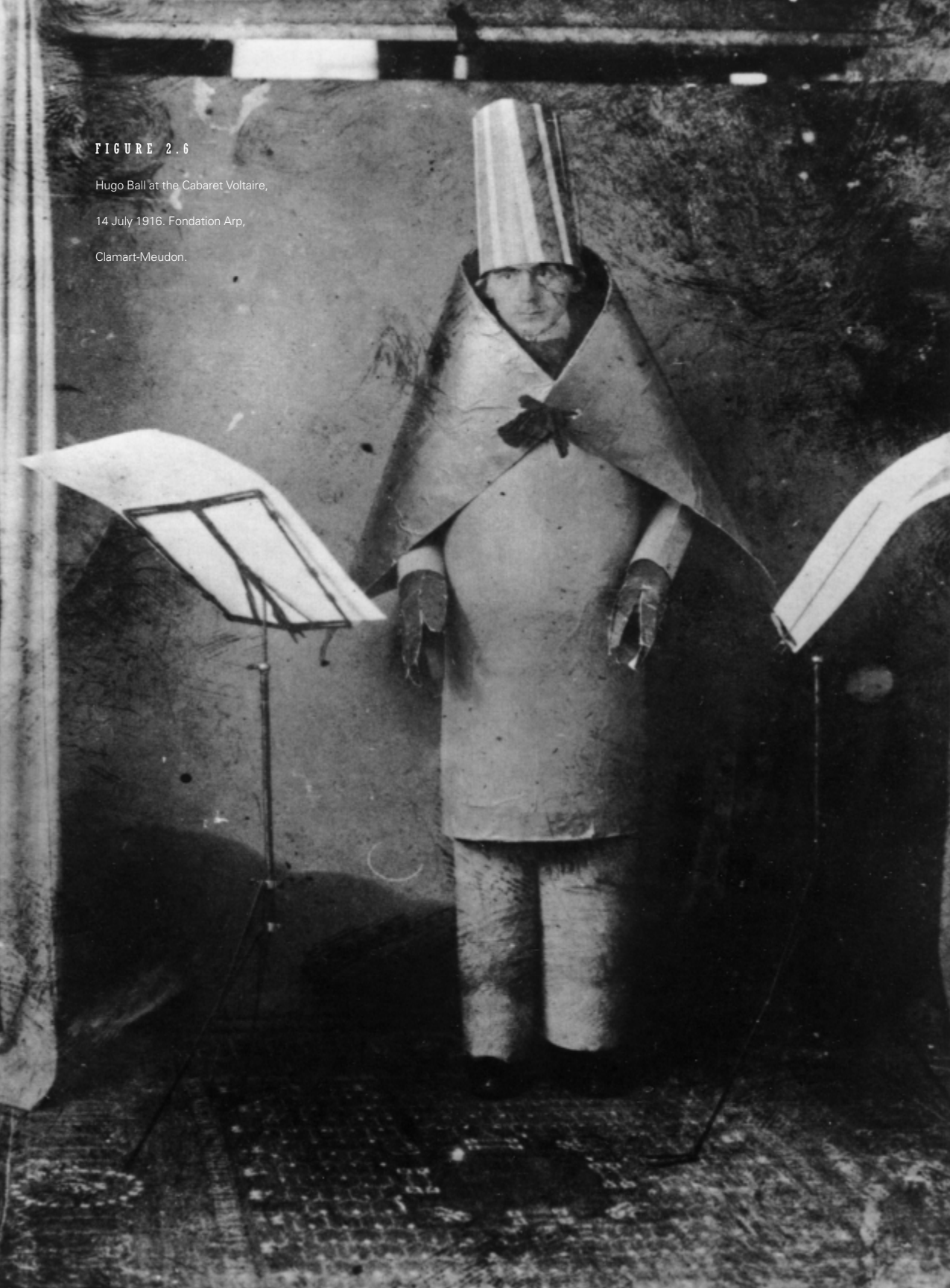
The performance begins relatively late when Richard Huelsenbeck at about half past eight begins to read his "declaration," with obvious ironic reference to the *Communist Manifesto*, ceremonially inviting all the noble and respected citizens of Zurich, the students, the artisans, the workers, the vagabonds, and those in all countries who are wandering without a goal, to unite and gather together under the banners of Dada. In the name of Cabaret Voltaire and Hugo Ball, the founder and leader of this erudite institute, Huelsenbeck proclaims that Dada doesn't mean a thing. Dada is precisely this meaningful nothingness, for which nothing means nothing. It's hardly a coincidence either that the company has chosen 14 July, the day when the Bastille was stormed, to emphasize its revolutionary attack on traditional aesthetics, on the "capitalist" war, on the whole of modernist art, in favor of something that is said to be

FIGURE 2.6

Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire,

14 July 1916. Fondation Arp,

Clamart-Meudon.



nothing except, as Huelsenbeck implies, “the best medicine contributing to a happy marriage.” The company is acting in favor of a “life without umbrellas or parallels,” as Tzara explains the same evening in his manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine, whose title comes from the popular aspirin and which is included in Tzara’s endlessly repeating and totally “senseless” play *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine*. In honor of the day Tzara is dressed in tails and monocle, standing in front of the howling audience reading his manifesto according to which Dada “sets up inconsequential bayonets the sumatran head of the German dada” and is both for and against unity and definitely against the future. At the same time Tzara admits that the dadaists are wise enough to know that their brains will become downy pillows, that their anti-dogmatism is as exclusivist as a bureaucrat, that they of course know that they are not free yet but are shouting for freedom, a harsh necessity without discipline or morality, and that they therefore spit on humanity. Dada, says Tzara, remains within the European frame of weakness, “it’s shit after all.” But from now on the dadaists mean to shit in assorted colors and bedeck the artistic zoo with the flags of every consulate—“We are circus directors whistling amid the winds of carnivals convents bawdy houses theaters realities sentiments restaurants HOHiHoHo Bang.”

Just take a good look at me, Tzara assures, and then he and Huelsenbeck read the bruitist poem “Pélamide”:

*a e ou youyouyouyou i e ou o  
 youyouyouyou  
 drrrrdrrrdrrrgrrr  
 stücke von grüner dauer flattern in meinem zimmer  
 a e o i ii e ou ii ii plenus venter  
 nennt er das zenter man kann’s nehmen  
 a-eman eman e man und zähmen das zenter der vier  
 beng bong beng bang  
 wohin gehst du iiiiuuft  
 machinist pan der ozean a ou ith  
 a o u ith i o u ath a o u ith o u a ith*

...<sup>30</sup>

While Tzara is dressed in tails, Hugo Ball has dressed himself in Marcel Janco's many-colored bishop's costume in which, according to Emmy Hennings,<sup>31</sup> he looks like Don Quixote as one can imagine that Goya would have painted this knight of the sorrowful countenance. In front of him on the platform he has three music stands on which he has placed the so-called opening manifesto and the manuscript to his sound poems "Karawane" and "Gadji beri bimba," the first of which is then still called "Zug der Elefanten." It may well be that, being a dramatist, he has read the manifesto before being carried up to the stage for the reason that, ensconced in a cardboard tube, he simply can't walk by himself, thus preparing the audience for what is to come. Anyhow, he reads poems that, according to the manifesto, don't do anything else than give up language as such. As he reads his *Lautgedichte* the accents become heavier and heavier, the expression increases the intensification of the consonants. According to the diary, Ball soon notices that his means of expression is not adequate to the pomp of this stage setting. He fears failure and has to concentrate intensely. After finishing the cloud song on the music stand at right he turns to the one in the center, beating industriously with his wings. The heavy vowel lines and the slouching rhythm of the elephants permit him to attain an ultimate climax. But how to end up? Suddenly he discovers that his voice, which seems to have no other choice, assumes the age-old cadence of the sacerdotal lamentation, like the chanting of the mass that wails through the churches of both the Occident and the Orient. For a moment, Ball says, it seemed as if, in his cubist mask, there emerged a pale, disturbed youth's face, that half-frightened, half-curious face of the ten-year-old lad hanging trembling and avid on the lips of the priest in the funeral masses and high masses of his parish. At precisely this moment the electric light goes out—and Ball is carried, moist with perspiration, like a magical bishop, into the abyss.

A few weeks later Hugo Ball, together with Emmy Hennings, has traveled to Vira Magadino on the shore of Lago Maggiore, while Tristan Tzara is having a rough time of realizing his ambitions of transforming Dada into a worldwide current.

"Dada doesn't mean anything," the Romanian Tristan Tzara said, and tried from the very beginning of his involvement in the activities at the Meierei to create a movement in the grand style.<sup>32</sup> In his capacity as the main propagandist he bombarded his French, Italian, and American friends, among them Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul

Eluard, and Max Jacob in Paris, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in Milan, and Marius de Zayas and Francis Picabia in New York. The fact that the very beginning was itself international is shown by the fact that the landlord Jan Ephraim of the Meierei was Dutch while—for instance—Emmy Hennings had spoken and sung fluently in Danish since her childhood in Flensburg at the Danish border and Hans Arp, born in Strasbourg, had a complete mastery of both French and German. The artist Marcel Slodki was born and grew up in Russian Ukraine and must therefore have spoken Russian fluently, as well as at least German if not French. The Eastern and Central European elements are also striking during the whole spring of 1916. A Russian “revolutionary chorus” of six men in exile performed on the first evening; the next day a certain Mr. Spagovsky entered the stage, according to Marietta di Monaco a blond madman from the northern parts of Russia,<sup>33</sup> and sang: “Papra papranitschka—papra papranitschka—nemoiju.” On 27 February the Russians were singing in the Roten Sarafan chorus, and two days later Hugo Ball with Emmy Hennings read passages from Leonid Andreyev’s “grievous legend” *The Life of Man*. On 4 March the company organized a whole Russian soirée, at which the student Nikolai Dolgalev, according to Hugo Ball a small, good-natured gentleman who was greeted with loud applause even before standing on the platform, gave two humorous sketches by Anton Chekhov and then sang a couple of Russian folk songs. An unknown lady read Ivan Turgenev’s “Egorushka” and poems by Nikolai Alexeyevich while the Serbian Jovan Pavlović sang impassioned soldiers’ songs followed by shouts of approval. According to Hugo Ball fifteen Russians were playing balalaika, Emmy Hennings read Russian fairy tales, while Ball himself read poems by Ropshin, Stepnyak, and Wassily Kandinsky—“the poems are very eccentric and attract great attention,” Ball explains in a letter to his sister Maria Hildebrand.<sup>34</sup> The soirée comes to an end with piano music by Scriabin and Rachmaninov. In this context it is interesting also that both the Ukrainian Slodki and the Russian Kandinsky contributed to the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire* alongside the Dutch Otto van Rees, the Austrian Max Oppenheimer, the French Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars, the Spanish Pablo Picasso, and the Italians Francesco Cangiullo, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Amedeo Modigliani, not to mention the Germans Ball and Hennings together with the Romanians Tzara and Janco.

In this Central and Eastern European perspective it may be of some interest also that Emmy Hennings had visited Moscow, St. Petersburg, Odessa, Cracow, and



FIGURE 2.7  
 Program, Galerie Dada,  
 Zurich, 28 April 1917,  
 with portraits by Marcel  
 Janco of Hugo Ball,  
 Tristan Tzara, and  
 Emmy Hennings.

**GALERIE  
DADA**

Samstag, den 28. April, abends 8 1/2 Uhr findet in den Räumen  
 der GALERIE, Bahnhofstrasse 19 (Eingang Tiefenhöfe 12) als  
 III geschlossene Veranstaltung ein

**ABEND NEUER KUNST**  
 statt

**PROGRAMM:**

I.

S. PERROTTET: Komposition von SCHÖNBERG,  
 R. VON LABAN und S. PERROTTET. (Klavier und  
 Violine).

F. GLAUSER: „Vater“, „Dinge“ (eigene Verse).

LÉON BLOY: „Extraits de l'exégèse des lieux-  
 communs“, übersetzt und gelesen von F. GLAUSER.

TRISTAN TZARA: Vers.

HUGO BALL: „Grand Hotel Metaphysik“, Prosa, in  
 Kostüm.

II.

MARCEL JANCO: Ueber Cubismus und eigene Bilder.

S. PERROTTET: Komposition von SCHÖNBERG,  
 R. VON LABAN und S. PERROTTET. (Klavier).

EMMY HENNINGS: „Kritik der Leiche“, „Notizen“.

HUGO BALL: Eigene Verse.

TRISTAN TZARA: „Froid lumière“, poème simultané  
 lu par 7 personnes.

III.  
 (Unterhaltungsprogramm)

„CHANSONS IN MASKEN“: HANS REIMANN,  
 Die Beleidigung“; JULES LAFORGUE, „Lohengrin“;  
 „MUSIQUE ET DANSE NÈGRES“: ALPHONSE  
 ALLAIS, „Le petit veau“; MAC NAB, „Le fiacre“;  
 LICHTENSTEIN, „Dämmerung“.

Mittwoch, 2 Mai  
 AUSSTELLUNG NEUER GRAPHIK.

Budapest as a young actor and touring variety artist. She herself tells<sup>35</sup> of how, marked by morphine and other drugs, between the performances she used to disappear down to the villages outside Moscow and Budapest to experience the unspoiled happiness among the simple peasants. Emmy Hennings was restless and impatient; catching sight one day in May 1913 of a poster describing the sights and attractions of Budapest, she traveled immediately down to the Hungarian capital and succeeded in getting an engagement at the Royal Orpheum on Erzsébet Körút, the biggest and most snobbish of all the variety theaters in Budapest, which according to advertisements in local newspapers was a first-class international cabaret with forty “sensational song and dance attractions, the newest hit songs, dances, and potpourris.”<sup>36</sup> The fact that Hennings also told of visiting Bucharest might be taken with a pinch of salt, if not for the surprising information Hugo Ball<sup>37</sup> gives in a letter to his sister that the poems of his beloved are being translated into Romanian “for Bucharest” and that she has an “entire colony of friends” in the Romanian capital.

However, the most remarkable fact concerning the constituting group at the Meierei and its international character is undoubtedly the overwhelming Romanian participation. If Arthur Segal is included in this group, even though he fairly soon made clear his reservations about the most provocative elements, five of ten persons were born and grew up in Romania of all the countries in Europe. Of course all of them had a complete mastery of Romanian, even though this language might not have been their mother tongue or the language spoken at home. Arthur Segal had already lived and worked in Germany for a long time and probably had no difficulties in speaking German. This must have been true of the Janco brothers as well, as students at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule where German was the language of instruction, while at least Marcel Janco<sup>38</sup> had studied French as his first foreign language at the Gheorghe Lazăr lyceum in Bucharest. Tristan Tzara<sup>39</sup> himself suggested that on the first evening at the Meierei he quickly translated some of his Romanian poems, while Hugo Ball<sup>40</sup> tells that Tzara read them in their original language. However, it is a fact that Tzara began to write in French as soon as he arrived in Zurich even though he spoke German as well,<sup>41</sup> the principal language in this part of Switzerland and thus indispensable for daily life.





IN **CENTRAL** AND  
**EASTERN EUROPE**

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All available preserved accounts show that Emmy Hennings was the star of the Cabaret Voltaire. She had indubitable stage experience and an unusual personal radiance as a decadent femme fatale, marked by her roving life as touring music hall artist and mistress. Hugo Ball quotes the *Zürcher Post* in his diary for 7 May 1916:

*The star of the cabaret, however, is Mrs. Emmy Hennings. Star of many nights of cabarets and poems. Years ago she stood by the rustling yellow curtain of a Berlin cabaret, hands on hips, as exuberant as a flowering shrub; today too she presents the same bold front and performs the same songs with a body that has since then been only slightly ravaged by grief.<sup>1</sup>*

Certainly in its initial phase, when emerging on the small stage of the Meierei, Dada would have had a totally different appearance without Emmy Hennings and her experiences of the international cabaret and café culture (each of which was dependent on the other). If Hugo Ball was the actual organizer taking care of the first contacts and the bureaucracy, Emmy Hennings was the one who knew how to entice and engage the audience. She was both physically and psychically marked by her hectic life as a touring artist in the whole of Europe—in Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, and Munich, Paris and Marseilles, Budapest, Prague, St. Petersburg and Moscow, and most likely in Bucharest as well. She had had one lover after another; occasionally she had even asked for money in exchange. She had sat at Café du Dome in Paris, where the most famous guests were Picasso, Apollinaire, Modigliani, and Max Jacob, all of whom would soon be figuring around Cabaret Voltaire as well. Like Hugo Ball too, she had drunk brandy at Café Stefanie in Munich alongside Johannes R. Becher and Leonhard Frank, at Café des Westens in Berlin in the company of Ferdinand Hardekopf and Jakob van Hoddis, all of them commuting among Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt, more or less mentally worn out, waiting for a war that would totally change a whole world.

As mentioned before, in Budapest Emmy Hennings had performed at the Royal Orpheum, the most splendid music hall of the city located on Erzsébet Körút. On the same street, only a few blocks away, Café New York was situated, the café that has been described as the most impressive monument of the café culture of the whole Habsburg Empire, named after the insurance company in whose office building the

coffeehouse attracted the intellectual and economic elite with its luxurious interiors, gold detail, sparkling mirrors, cut-glass chandeliers, and marble tables; at the opening of the café just before the turn of the century the author and dramatist Ferenc Molnár threw the keys in the Danube as a proof that the café would never close.

Like the guests of, for instance, Café Central in Vienna, which subscribed to 251 daily newspapers, the “clients” of Café New York too, like the guests of all other coffeehouses in the region, had to keep up to date on both the cultural and political life of all Europe, in many respects with the help of precisely these newspapers, papers from Hungary and from Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, France, England, Spain, Italy, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, the United States, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. As in Vienna, here too the guests were offered humor magazines in German, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, French, Spanish, and English, as well as professional journals dealing with everything from literature, art, and politics to law, finance, political economy, technics, traffic, sports, hunting, travel, music, fashion, housekeeping, chemistry, and pharmacy.

Although the term *La Belle Époque* from a Western European perspective is associated mainly with Paris and London, a corresponding culture flourished not only in the metropolises of the Habsburg Empire and the German Reich but also in cities like Riga, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev, in the same way as in Bucharest. The Romanian capital did in fact do everything possible to imitate Paris; and because Transylvania had been part of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy before it was united with Romania in connection with the peace treaty of Trianon in 1920, at least a great part of Romania ought to be geographically considered as belonging to Central Europe in the same way as the Habsburg Empire did. At the turn of the century this Europe presented an astonishingly homogeneous intellectual environment including, as the Swedish historian Kristian Gerner puts it,<sup>2</sup> everything from painting to chemistry and physics and stretching from Glasgow to St. Petersburg and Moscow, even though the majority of people were uneducated, low-productive peasants and the societies were stratified in different stages of development, the more pronounced the farther east you went. The relationship between the intellectual elite and the masses became more static than in the West at the same time as the states’ hold on society

FIGURE 3.1

Café New York, Budapest,  
in the 1930s. Magyar Nemzeti  
Múzeum, Budapest.



became more tight. The fact that this society appeared and was described as backward is due, according to Gerner, to the fact that both politicians in power and opposition intellectuals considered the social development of the West as normative—even though, in fact, neither the scientific nor the artistic life of Central Europe at the turn of the century can be characterized as backward but rather just the opposite, since the sciences and the arts in the big cities of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and even in tsarist Russia were vanguard by their nature, in fact centers of modernism.

However, Central Europe was decisively handicapped by its weak economies. The Hungarian historians Iván Berend and György Ránki have discussed the “backwardness” of the margins of Central and Eastern Europe in several studies, summarizing some of their thesis in their volume *The European Periphery and Industrialization*.<sup>3</sup> The economies of the Balkans, for instance, weighed down by the region’s past, were clearly incapable of adjusting to the accelerating demands of the market; the productivity was low, the markets unstable, and the export sector couldn’t achieve those economic changes which in other parts of Europe were reflected in the economy as a whole. Although the national income increased, the growth was spent, for the most part, on symbolic modernizations, contrary to what happened in other parts of Central Europe, where for example Hungary could present a growth of exports of 3.6 percent between 1890 and 1910, which nevertheless was much less than the European average. Foreign capital investment played a decisive part in the relative growth of the economies. Between 1865 and 1914 France placed 40 percent of its foreign investment in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Russia, and the Balkans, and from the 1880s the German investment as well became considerable, with 13 percent of the Western European capital resources in the region being German by 1914; more than half of German foreign investment went to the dual monarchy, Russia, and the Balkans. At the turn of the century as much as 40 percent of all investment in Hungary, for instance, was foreign, as well as more than half of the banks and 36 percent of the industrial capital. In the Balkans the railway system, the infrastructure, and primary production were built almost totally by virtue of foreign capital. Generally speaking both the rural proletariat and the workers in the cities in the entire region constituted a desperate segment living far below the level of poverty; together with the radical intellectuals, they formed an explosive power, especially in those countries where the social tensions and conflicts were most striking. The 1905 revolution



in Russia had already showed the potential power of this segment, a revolution paralleled by the Romanian peasant rebellion in 1907,<sup>4</sup> which broke out in the form of spread-out and relatively modest protests among the peasants in Flamânzi in the northern parts of Moldavia against the landowners and their stewards but which surprisingly quickly spread south to the urban areas of the country. When the peasants had reached Wallachia they went berserk, occupied the town halls of several provincial towns, plundered large estates, and destroyed grain stores. The dominating political groups reorganized themselves as soon as possible in a liberal government supported by the conservatives which suppressed the uprising with extreme force; certain villages were attacked by artillery, approximately 10,000 peasants were killed, and thousands of village teachers, intellectuals, and peasants were arrested and put in jail. One of the reasons for the uprising must have been the frustration and anger the peasants felt knowing that they themselves owned less than 40 percent of the land while the landowners, less than one percent of the population, controlled the rest.<sup>5</sup> At the same time the areas of wheat production had doubled between 1860 and 1900, so that Romania at the outbreak of the war in 1914 stood for 8 percent of the world's total wheat production, which in turn—of course—meant enormous riches for the landowners, the boyars, most of whom never even visited their estates. For those who cherished the notion of an emerging modern society, the rebellion challenged not only the stability of the state but also the fundamental precepts of culture.

The distortion of the economic structures of Romania is reflected also in the fact that practically the entire oil industry was built and controlled by foreign capital;<sup>6</sup> overall, 80 percent of Romanian industry was in foreign hands and 75 percent of the banks, of which the most important, besides the central bank, were the German-ruled Banca Generală Română, the Austrian Banca de Credit Român, and the Austro-French Banca Comercială Română.<sup>7</sup> The industrial production per capita was only one-third of the average in Europe, and in spite of the fact that foreign investors had invested about 80 million dollars in the oil industry, this had only a minor importance for the growth of social welfare and for economic structural transformation. Just as Romania exported 98 percent of its wheat unrefined, practically all oil from the Romanian oil wells was refined outside Romania, at the same time as the country imported both gas and other refined oil products. The railway was foreign as

well. Already in 1865 the Briton John Truve Barkley had been given a concession to build the first 70-kilometer-long line between Bucharest and Giurgiu, which was opened four years later, in the same year as the section of 100 kilometers between Roman and Burdujeni opened. Both sections were administered by a French syndicate. In 1888 the Romanian railway measured 2,500 kilometers in length, in 1916 more than 3,500 kilometers.

Like most parts of Central and Eastern Europe, Romanian society too was strictly hierarchical, with only a few possibilities for crossing the social borders.<sup>8</sup> This exceptional lack of social mobility came in spite of the fact that a great deal was invested in primary and secondary education and in universities and colleges. A notable social phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe was also the fact that scarcely anybody was “native” in the small and static middle class. This gap was filled by people—mostly Germans and Jews—who had lived in the countries for generations without being integrated into their old structures, or by more recent immigrants. These were already overrepresented in business and banking in the provinces, dominating a great deal of the intellectual and economic life in the more or less isolated small towns. For instance, Greek businessmen played a significant role in the Romanian principalities as well as in Hungary, while ethnic Germans constituted the largest separate minority group in the whole region at the same time as about 5 percent of the population was Jewish in both Romania and Hungary at the turn of the century. In Budapest more than 25 percent was Jewish, which gave the anti-Semitic mayor reason to call the city “Judapest.” While nearly 80 percent of the Romanian population was working in agriculture, only 2.5 percent of the Jews were engaged in farming and 80 percent were working in business and industry; 33 percent of all town dwellers in Romania were Jewish, living alongside other minorities (Hungarians, Germans, Ruthenians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Turks, and Russians). On the whole, the map of the minorities in the region was like a piece of patchwork—in Bulgaria for instance 30 percent of the population was Turkish or of other minorities, in Serbia 10 percent belonged to different ethnic minorities; 10 million Germans, 6.5 million Czechs, 1.3 million Slovenians, and more than one million each of Croatians, Serbs, and Italians lived in the western parts of the Habsburg Empire; 3 million Romanians, 2 million Russians, 2 million Slovaks, nearly 2 million Croats, and one million Serbs lived in Hungary. The religious multiplicity too was striking, with Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Russian

Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, and Protestants living side by side. Both the ethnic and the religious components were not only extremely mixed but also extensively inter-related and connected to social stratification and class distinctions. For example, the Slovaks and the Romanians in Transylvania, most of whom were poor peasants, were subjected to Hungarian landowners, while the Romanian peasants in Moldavia and Wallachia were subjected to Jewish leaseholders, who themselves were subjected to Romanian boyars.

The growth in social welfare in the western parts of Europe as a consequence of industrialization and the sociopolitical changes in the wake of the French revolution resulted in an enormous gap between West and East; according to Iván Berend, the GNP in the West was 150 percent higher than the average in the East during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The enormous growth in the West required a response while it also attracted many intellectuals, and even members of the old ruling elite were pleading for reforms. Enormous efforts were made, in which the romantic, nationalistic notion of the unity of the people, the nation, and the language and their common history became incomparably the most important factor in the whole region.

In Romania the national awakening went so far that nationalism and patriotism became the country's primary official policy, for which both politicians and intellectuals pleaded at the same time as they worked against all those liberal reforms that might be interpreted as non-Romanian. The theory of Daco-Roman continuity, formulated at the end of the eighteenth century, was soon to become the basis of the Romanian national identity.<sup>10</sup> According to this, modern-day Romanians are the descendants of two noble races, the Dacians and the Roman legions who defeated them after an arduous struggle. The theory insists that these people have permanently inhabited the territories where Romanian speakers were in a majority by the eighteenth century. Samuil Micu, active in Hungarian Transylvania, and Petru Maior, working in Ottoman-dominated Moldavia and Wallachia, shaped the notion of the "happy Dacia," Dacia Felix, which included Transylvania, subsequently occupied by the Magyars, which the Romanians therefore had "historic right" to incorporate into the Romanian nation. This ideology formed the basis as well of the language reform that was initiated around 1800 by Ianache Văcărescu and Ion Eliade-Rădulescu, who claimed that Romanian and Italian are dialects belonging to a common great language. The



**FIGURE 3.2**

In Budapest at the turn of  
the century. Magyar Nemzeti  
Múzeum, Budapest.

language was “re-Latinized” as words with a non-Latin origin were purged from it and the Cyrillic alphabet was substituted by the Latin alphabet; according to *Lexicon Budense* in 1825, all Romanian words descend from the Latin. The result of these efforts alongside equally strong efforts in culture and education was a paradox: a Latin nation adhering to an Eastern Orthodox religious rite, a Western nation by language and ethnic heritage located in an Oriental world of Slavs, Turks, and Magyars. “New” Romanians of all social strata subscribed to this German-inspired national-romantic belief in their national singularity as “Europeans” living in an Eastern environment whose habits and customs they purported to reject but, for the most part, accepted. Such disparity between cultural aspiration and geopolitical reality endowed Romania with one of Europe’s most troubled modern histories, a history that can be said to have begun in that moment when the principalities Moldavia and Wallachia were united in January-February 1859 under Prince Alexandru Ion Cuza. Five years later Cuza succeeded in obtaining full autonomy from Istanbul regarding domestic policy but was forced to abdicate two years after that, when Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a cousin of Napoleon III and head of the Catholic wing of the Prussian royal house, was elected hereditary ruler of Romania. After Russia’s declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire in 1877, it took only two weeks for Romania to join the war and an additional two weeks before the deputies declared the country independent. This independence was recognized the next year by the European powers at the Congress of Berlin, and three years later Prince Carol assumed the title of King Carol I. The facts that the constitution was “Belgian” and that a German prince sat on the throne didn’t matter much for the national self-esteem.

Despite the aspirations for nationally united cultures, the national and ethnic patchwork of Central and Eastern Europe became decisively important for the appearance of a specific cultural mobility, while practically no country in the region succeeded in constituting an integrated, united mentality like those in France and Germany, nor yet a stable segmentation like the one between the English and the Scots in Britain. Instead there were national identities multiply stratified: the nations in question were atomized rather than homogenized.<sup>11</sup> At the same time as modernism triumphed in the West and manifested itself in, for instance, the big world’s fairs symbolized by the Crystal Palace in London and the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the seeds of a “postmodernism”

were sowed in Cracow, Prague, Vienna, Ljubljana, Budapest, and Bratislava. According to Kristian Gerner, Central Europe had changed at the turn of the century from being a periphery and a receiver of impulses into a center and a transmitter of impulses in science and culture, the cities in particular playing the leading role in this development.

The national, often nationalistic point of departure was something common to the cultural life in all the countries of the region, activated on the one hand by the liberation from Ottoman rule in the wake of the Russian-Turkish war, on the other hand by the weakened centralism within the Habsburg Empire. Two questions were often confronted: how does “our” nation differ from other nations, and to what extent are “we” as modern as the rest of Europe? In fact, in Romania the intricate problem seems to have gotten a “solution” quite different from those tried by the other nations, because the mostly Jewish avant-garde that emerged just before the outbreak of the war in 1914 and especially after the peace treaty in 1920 never came to play the same nationalistic instruments as the strongly anti-Semitic cultural and political establishment chained to the “continuity theory” about the Romanian historical presence in and primacy over the “original” Romanian territory. This must also have been a contributing reason for why the comparably extensive and unusually intense Romanian avant-garde never achieved the same nationalist appearance as, for example, the Ma group in Hungary and the Zenit group Yugoslavia. On the contrary, the Romanian avant-garde took pains more than perhaps any other to constantly update and extend its international network (already exceptionally wide from the beginning) without pronounced, solely nationalistic aims.

Regarding the cultural development connected to the various nationalistic efforts, the prelude itself was very much international, even while the common impulses were used in the building of the respective nations. To a great extent this is true, for instance, of the phenomenon variously named art nouveau, Jugendstil, or the Secession movement, which appeared at the same time in Paris, Munich, Vienna, and Moscow.<sup>12</sup> In Central and Eastern Europe this style or artistic ideology was almost immediately connected to the aspirations for a national identity, which in turn was consciously related to the folkloric peasant cultures of the region. For instance, the well-known Hungarian symbolist Endre Ady incorporated György Dózsa (the leader of the sixteenth-century peasant rebellion) into his country’s national heritage. Ady



**FIGURE 3.3**

Prague at the turn of the century.

Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum,

Budapest.



**FIGURE 3.4**

Zagreb in 1908. Magyar Nemzeti

Múzeum, Budapest.



was to exercise an explicit influence on the literary development of the neighboring countries as well: he played a decisive role, for instance, for the Slovak Ivan Krasko, during his school days in Iași a pupil of the Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu; for the Romanian poet Octavian Goga; and for the Serbian writer Veljko Petrović.<sup>13</sup> At the same time as Ady was proclaiming the unity of the nation, the architect Ödön Lechner was using stylistic elements from folk art in the town hall of Kecskemét and in the museum of art and industrial design in Budapest in almost the same way as—for instance—the artist group Arta 1900 in Bucharest interpreted the presumed history of the Romanian nation in terms of a pronounced narrative-allegoric aesthetic characterized by its explicit folkloric elements and historicism. This is an aesthetic also expressed in Cecilia Cutescu-Storck's stained-glass work in the school of economics and business administration in Bucharest as well as in Chica Budești's contemporary furniture and interior design.

In Romania, the nationalists consciously promoting the continuity theory also enforced the idea that the Romanian people could no longer be called a *geschichtloses Volk* but, on the contrary, was far superior to those of the Hungarians, the Germans, and especially the Slavs, and that the Romanians were the true heirs of a great and glorious past manifested in, above all, the hereditary village communities and the ancient manners and customs of the farmers as well as in both the peasants' persistent, even stubborn resistance to the Turkish "invaders" and their ineradicable longing for freedom, their incomparable heroism, their exemplary virtues, and their moral rectitude.<sup>14</sup> This nationalistic "recipe" soon permeated all through the cultural and political establishment at the same time as this elite was focusing on France and French culture as the model for the modernization of the country. In many cases this inherent paradox was to function as a preserving brake when the political life became provincial and filled with seemingly insoluble conflicts, while in other cases the same paradoxical references to the imagined "domestic" peasant culture and to Romania's "self-evident" and "rightful" position in the Western cultural community led to the exclusion of a universally prevailing cultural expression; the paradox became a way of living. For instance, as soon as the academies of fine art were established in Iași (1860) and Bucharest (1864), the teachers were enlisted from among Czech, German, Swiss, Italian, and Hungarian artists living and working in the Romanian

principalities. This served the aim of “updating” Romanian art according to Western European models, mainly French ones, among which the Barbizon aesthetics and pleinairism became the most important, at the same time as the promoters aimed to stimulate the national self-consciousness by drawing on Romanian history for much of their subject matter. After preparatory courses the artists were also encouraged to finish their studies abroad, mainly in Munich or Paris, while very few left for Vienna, Prague, or St. Petersburg, those cities that attracted so many other artists in Central and Eastern Europe.

Such a practice reinforced Western strivings, as is apparent in the example of Nicolae Grigorescu, the most accomplished Romanian artist of the late nineteenth century. A former icon painter for the Romanian Orthodox church and a front-line war correspondent in the Romanian war of independence, Grigorescu went to Paris, where he was engaged in Barbizon aesthetics and was clearly inspired by the art of Millet, Courbet, and Corot. Returning to Romania in 1887, he introduced pleinairism, inspiring scores of imitators. Soon the younger generation revolted against the standards of the Salon, widely repudiated as aesthetically moribund, and formed the Society of Independent Artists, which organized the epochal “Independent Artists’ Exhibition” of 1896 in Bucharest. Like related organizations in Budapest, Ljubljana, Munich, Zagreb, Belgrade, and elsewhere, the Romanian society published in 1898 a review called *Ileana* that, according to Mansbach, gave a new impetus to the arts in Romania.<sup>15</sup> Although it avoided the fiery rhetoric that would soon become common copy for the vanguard periodicals, *Ileana* was a “clarion call for a vigorous aesthetics” prompting Romania to attain international recognition as a nation with a defined modern culture. Unlike the more common practice in the region of appropriating and adapting particular Western styles for the representation of national, mainly historical subject matters or the articulation of an explicitly national cultural identity, Romania’s early modern artists became, as Mansbach puts it, the representatives of French aesthetics in the Orient; their uncritical enthusiasm for wide-ranging pictorial styles and philosophies foreclosed the possibility of any one national mode of expression. The artistic avant-garde had to wait until the postwar period, since Romanian art was valued according to the degree it adapted to French styles, the modes of expression in most cases being those prevailing before impressionism. For instance, the artists of the “young” artists’ group Tinerimea Artistică, formed in 1900, were

cultivating very conservative aesthetic ideals at the same time as they called for “a total renewal,” which was not considered a paradox since the idea of a moderate and tolerant coexistence of different styles and expressions was cherished, according to Amelia Pavel, in styles and modes of expression established already in the 1880s and the 1890s.<sup>16</sup> Not until around 1905 was the group slightly radicalized thanks to Camil Ressu, inspired by Cézanne, and Dimitrie Harlescu, educated in Munich and inspired by both the German Secession and the French fauves.

In literature Mihai Eminescu was labeled as the national hero par excellence up to the turn of the century, when new forces were beginning to group themselves mainly as a result of the changes in society owing to the emerging industrialization. In the mid-1870s grain prices had declined catastrophically, and it became more and more obvious that the image of the grateful farmer and the “natural” village community as bearer of true Romanian culture was false and did not correspond very well with a reality characterized by utmost poverty, misery, autocratic boyars, ruthless profiteers, moneylenders, and village gendarmes, a reality exposed in the clash between the demands of the new age and the half-feudal conditions in the rural areas. In spite of this—or rather because of it—the established literary norms were still, at the turn of the century and during the following decades, almost totally dominated by two parallel and partly overlapping ideologies, both of which can be said to transport the continuity theory into the twentieth century by their common conception of the special character of Romanian culture as deriving from the traditional village community. The “samanatorists” got their label from the weekly magazine *Sămănătorul*, founded in 1901 and published until 1910; the journal’s most important and renowned contributor was the historian, philologist, and politician Nicolae Iorga, trained in Paris, Berlin, and Leipzig and one of the most important representatives of Romanian ethno-nationalism besides the philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga. In Iorga’s opinion literature and culture in general must be oriented toward the specific nature of the Romanian people and once again—of course—bring forth a love for the Romanian village and its people. To him art has a specific ethical-ethnic function, a mission to stimulate and to express the Romanian farmer, in accordance with the notion of the need for the artist and the poet to unite in a “holy” union with the woods, the rivers, and the whole of nature in a constant uprising against a civilization that has alienated man from his natural, original existence. Remembering the peas-

ant village of his childhood, Blaga similarly evokes this “metaphysical” village in, for instance, the speech he delivered on being elected to the Romanian Academy in 1931, according to which “our village was placed at the center of existence, and its geography verged upon the mythological and the metaphysical, which were the natural and indisputable windows of the village.”<sup>17</sup>

In turn, the “poporanists,” standing close to the Russian narodniks,<sup>18</sup> got their label from the Romanian word for “people,” *popor*. Here too the ideological foundation referred to the traditional peasant community. According to Constantin Sere, who contributed to the journals *Adevărul* and *Evenimentul literar*, like all the other explicitly agrarian countries of southeast Europe, Romania had absolutely no chance of establishing any large-scale industry, which was also the reason why the country didn’t have any pronounced proletariat expressing social democratic ideas. Instead social democracy should be replaced by a “peasant socialism” on the basis of the fundamentally democratic village community with the smallholders as its driving force. Within the area of literature similar ideas were expressed and developed by the critic and editor Garabet Ibrăileanu, a former disciple of Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and the theoretical beacon of poporanist literature in, for instance, the journal *Viața românească*, which was published right up to 1946. Referring to the “Romanian soul,” the specific Romanian environment, and the Romanian race, Ibrăileanu evoked the importance of a kind of filter or prism, a specific Romanian sight through which the world must be filtered. In a big survey concerning “the critical spirit in Romanian culture” in 1909, he explained that an important presumption for the development of critical thinking during the nineteenth century was the emergence of a specific “Romanian spirit,” especially in Moldavia, opposed to Oriental cultural impulses. Here is the cradle of Romanian culture, he exclaimed.

This nostalgic populism and utopian ethno-nationalism with a strong xenophobic strain clashed badly with reality only a few years after the turn of the century with the 1907 peasant upheaval. According to distinguished historians, the uprising was put down with such force and in such a short time because the ruling elite feared a possible military intervention from both Vienna and St. Petersburg, an intervention that could jeopardize the independence of the Romanian state as such.<sup>19</sup> However, the magnitude of the violence shook the confidence of the ruling layers in society and brought into question its pretensions to be a Western, Latin country. For those who

cherished the notion of an emerging cosmopolitan society, the rebellion challenged both the stability of the nation and the fundamental perceptions of culture. The revolt also led almost immediately to a regressive approach among many intellectuals—including large numbers of underpaid classicists, historians, and lawyers who composed the nation’s overstuffed bureaucracy—who had previously encouraged and endorsed Romania’s turn to the West and who in many cases now grouped around Nicolae Iorga and his strongly xenophobic conception of the society. Not surprisingly, the emerging cultural avant-garde now experienced a backlash, its artists and writers excoriated by the conservatives for their “foreignness”: Germans, Macedonians, and Hungarians, many if not most of them Jews, i.e., “pseudo-Romanians.”

Romania was not unique in regard to the populist regression. According to Iván Berend, as a partial consequence of the nationalistic aspirations in Central and Eastern Europe, the turn-of-the-century generation came to express strong doubts about the value of “imitating” Western European institutions, solutions, and expressions and looked instead for alternative solutions to their own social, political, and economic problems.<sup>20</sup> Endre Ady, for instance, was among those who lost their faith in the Western models, and he explained already in 1910 that “our ideals are out-of-date rubbish everywhere.” One year later he wrote in an article about the “schizophrenic” Hungarian people that “we want a real democracy and are calling for universal rights to vote and secret elections” but that “the victories in other far more developed countries that have preceded us by centuries have spoiled our taste for such things.” Indeed, Ady was not alone, and even the animated Russian avant-garde was quite quickly “pan-Slavized,” trying to profile itself against “decadent” Western modernism. The longing for changes and new, fresh solutions was manifested in “new” political ideologies, different party programs, and efforts to modernize the economies on a national basis. According to Modris Eksteins, to whom Berend explicitly refers, the striving for freedom and liberation was an important impetus behind the artistic and literary experiments at the turn of the century, a break with aesthetic and moral authorities to a large extent dictated by Paris.<sup>21</sup> Thus, according to both Eksteins and Berend, it’s not very surprising that much of the intellectual and psychological driving force came from the periphery geographically, socially, generationally, and sexually, i.e., from places on the borders of traditional hegemony. Berend is quite

right in saying that the Central and Eastern European avant-garde powerfully articulating the general sense of crisis, and that the need for a radical transformation of the old order was born and nurtured in the stuffy atmosphere of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the Russian empire, and Romania.<sup>22</sup>

This had also a decisive impact on the current or rather the ideology or the ontological state of being that the Romanian Tristan Tzara baptized “Dada,” as will be shown.



**MARCEL IANCU  
BECOMES  
MARCEL JANCO**

**4**





In Western cultural history Marcel Janco is best known as one of the founding members of Dada in Zurich in 1916. Regarding the Romanian avant-garde in the interwar period Marcel Hermann Iancu is more known as the spider in the web and as the designer of a great number of Romania's first constructivist buildings, both private villas and multistory buildings in Bucharest and elsewhere. On the other hand, in Israel Marcel Janco is best known as the "father" of the artists' colony of Ein Hod just north of Tel Aviv and for his pedagogic achievements in the young Jewish state. Already this may testify to his flexibility, his exceptionally manifold talent, and perhaps also to his adaptability. The fact too that, as soon as he arrived in Zurich during the summer of 1914, he changed his Romanian-sounding name Iancu into Janco because this simply sounded better in French<sup>1</sup> may be due to his recognizing the value of mimicry in a city filled with all kinds of foreign refugees. The change of name may also be interpreted as a necessary strategy of survival in the new environment, unfamiliar and therefore perhaps frightening to the nineteen-year-old student.

The young man standing on the platform at the Meierei crying out his inconceivable and totally mad poems and hollow words is described by contemporary witnesses as an unusually careful, reserved, and shy man, charming, melancholic, and excessively beautiful. Hugo Ball explains in his diary in May 1916 that Janco is a tall, thin man who has a striking quality of feeling embarrassed at other people's foolishness and bizarreness, and then asking for indulgence or understanding with a smile or a gentle gesture.<sup>2</sup> According to Ball, Marcel Janco was also the only one in the original group at Cabaret Voltaire who didn't need irony to "cope with these times." However, Ball says, in unguarded moments a melancholic seriousness gave his character a nuance of contempt and magnificent solemnity. Janco is also described as a tall and friendly young architect and painter who combed his black and shiny hair in Gypsy curls, a man who loved to talk forever and who, for the most part, made his living as a music hall singer accompanied by his brothers.<sup>3</sup> In the Dada circle Marcel Janco was also known as a real lady's man, which is indirectly confirmed by Suzanne Perrottet, one of the most celebrated dancers of Rudolf von Laban's dance company.<sup>4</sup> According to her, Marcel Janco, "pretty as a picture," must have been "the most beautiful of all of us." Janco's brother Jules describes his brother as both serious and reserved,<sup>5</sup> which doesn't necessarily contradict his reputation as a lady-killer. According to Jules Janco, his brother was always and everywhere engaged in art in some

way or another; loved poetry and books, which he elaborately rebound, for instance Verlaine's poems which he read again and again. This neat trait of his character is also confirmed by his artful, formal dressing clearly visible in preserved photos from Zurich.

Richard Huelsenbeck too describes Janco as "a tall, friendly man from Roumania" with an easy smile who would talk to anybody about everything and who would discuss any question in the universe, from morning to night, or from night to morning.<sup>6</sup> He would sit in the Baserbas, a Spanish restaurant, and rant about the misery of the war, or, with Huelsenbeck himself, he would take a rowboat, sometimes with girls, sometimes without, to sail on Zürichsee and discuss abstract art. Janco was, Huelsenbeck says, a young architect, deeply in love with the revolution in art that had begun with cubism and that was then throwing its lightning from the futurists' camp in Italy. He was as good in discussion as in rowing, as in love, as in everything, one of the greatest pioneers of the Dada movement, a man with many talents but without arrogance, a man always helpful and never interfering with other persons' ambitions—the best side of him was his warmth, his affection for his friends, and his loyalty to Dada, which according to Huelsenbeck he understood deeply and profoundly.

According to Hans Richter, there was no performance, soirée, lecture, manifestation, or exhibition in Zurich in which Marcel Janco did not actively take part either artistically or by organizing or even financially, either with posters, masks, illustrations, set designs, or simultaneous readings.<sup>7</sup> Marcel Janco was always in the center, always and everywhere, which also the Romanian art historian Geo Șerban indirectly points out—in connection with the centenary Janco exhibition in Bucharest in 1996—saying that Janco the painter, graphic artist, set designer, illustrator, architect, urban planner, lecturer, and analyst of current events became a catalyst in all these fields, a promoter of modern, flexible directions meant to liberate the creative energies from the risk of marginality and various bounds, i.e., provincialism, apathy, ready-made truths, and gregarious opportunistic gestures.<sup>8</sup> He was only a teenager when he made his first efforts in the fields of art and literature, and from then on, no matter how old he was, he never spared himself to set the ball rolling, which—according to Șerban—proves that he was a true founder, an instigator.



**FIGURE 4.1**

Marcel Iancu, 1910s. Muzeul  
Literaturii Române, Bucharest.



**FIGURE 4.2**

Marcel Iancu with his mother  
Rachel Iancu, 1896.  
Janco Dada Museum, Ein Hod.

Unlike the other Romanians at the Meierei and Cabaret Voltaire, the Iancu brothers were born and grew up in Bucharest;<sup>9</sup> like both Samuel Rosenstock and Aron Sigalu they belonged to a wealthy Jewish family that still celebrated the old Jewish festivals, even though the family in every other respect considered itself naturalized and more or less assimilated into Romanian society. Hermann Zui Iancu had already reached the age of thirty-nine when his first son was born on 24 May 1895, the mother Rachel Iancu, born Iuster in Iași, being only twenty-three. The son was given the name of Marcel Hermann and in October of the next year got a brother, named Iuliu, while the youngest brother George was born in February 1899, followed by their sister Lucia in August 1900. According to Marcel Iancu's birth certificate from 1930, the occupation of his father was a *comerciant*, i.e., a merchant, a dealer, or simply a tradesman, an occupation most common of the few allowed for Jews. According to his son in 1982, Hermann Iancu had a partnership in Bucharest with his two brothers and a friend called the Iancu Brothers, a business for suits and material.<sup>10</sup> Apparently Hermann Iancu did his work pretty successfully because the family could regard itself as upper-middle-class; in one of the preserved photos Rachel Iancu is posing dressed in a bushy hat decorated with feathers, a necklace, two precious bracelets, long-sleeved gloves, and a stole. The line of business in which Marcel Iancu's father was engaged was not very uncommon among the Jews either. Being assimilated Jews with a "free" choice, the family had, despite or perhaps thanks to the many Jews in the area, chosen to settle down on 8 Strada Decebal outside the Jewish quarter, where, for example, the big synagogue, Templul Coral,<sup>11</sup> built in the mid-nineteenth century, was situated on Strada Vineri, only to move a few years later to Strada Gândului in the absolute center of the city and again, a couple of years later, to Strada Trinității, where Hermann Iancu let an architect plan and build one of Bucharest's largest private houses with a garden of several thousand square meters.

Already a student of the well-reputed Gheorghe Sincai elementary school, at which he was registered during the autumn of 1908, Marcel Iancu was encouraged by his mother, a trained piano player, to apply to the academy of music, but because his mother apparently also supported his interest in drawing and painting, he chose to get private lessons from the well-known artist Iosif Iser,<sup>12</sup> who by this time was working as a caricaturist for several Romanian and foreign newspapers and journals. In November 1909 Iser exhibited at the Ateneul in Bucharest alongside André Derain,

among others, whom he knew from his visit to Paris in the previous year.<sup>13</sup> “My artistic life (the other one has neither importance nor meaning),” Iancu explained in an interview given in 1933, “started as a pupil of Iser’s, after a series of obligatory pilgrimages to the arrogant artists of that time.”<sup>14</sup> Iser, who had studied at both Anton Ažbe’s school and the academy of fine arts in Munich, declared war at the beginning of his career against the sentimentality of Romanian painting and was to be characterized as a true rebel against contemporary bourgeois taste. In his choice of motifs he sympathized with “simple people,” farmers, Turks, and Tatars, whom he depicted in a postimpressionist style combined with an explicitly architectural use of graphic lines. These lines reveal his talents as illustrator at the same time as they suggest strongly Marcel Iancu’s drawings and caricatures much later, while Iancu’s own early landscape paintings refer to Iser’s postimpressionism. At the same time influences from Iser, who admired Cézanne and the Nabis, can be traced in Iancu’s preoccupation with the decorative two-dimensional surface and its special demands and compositional effects.

Nobody but Iser taught Iancu the fundamental principles of both the technics and the practice of painting, and it is obvious that Iser’s constant talk about the importance of the architectural composition of the drawing as the first and original presumption of art lay the foundation of Iancu’s future art; Iser talked constantly about the “intelligence of the line.” It is hardly a coincidence either that Iancu soon decided to study architecture in the same way as Iser had once traveled to Munich to become an architect. Just like Iancu’s art much later, Iser’s art too was characterized as constantly transgressing the borders between genres and techniques at the same time as it oscillated stylistically between different artistic expressions. The fact that Iancu would sit on the editorial boards of several journals both as illustrator and administrator as well as writer may also be connected to Iser’s influence, in the same way as Iser’s critique of contemporary cultural movements as being both opportunist and repressive may relate to Iancu’s future avant-gardist attacks on the political and artistic establishment. Already in Munich Iser had contributed to the magazine *Jugend* and had been a member of the editorial staff of the satiric, highly provocative journal *Simplizissimus*, which Thomas Theodor Heine had made into one of the most widespread journals of its kind with a circulation of more than 100,000 copies. The year he returned home from the Bavarian capital, Iser was—on the initiative of the painter



**FIGURE 4.3**

Iosif Iser, caricature, c. 1910.

Muzeul de Istorie a Evreilor din

România "sef rabin dr. Moses

Rosen," Bucharest.

Ștefan Popescu—engaged by the newspaper *Adevărul* in Bucharest, in which he scoured, among others, the Russian tsar because of the revolution in 1905. One year later he satirically described the regime of King Carol I as nothing more than a comic masquerade. Just as characteristically, only one week after his arrival in Paris in January 1908 for a short visit, Iser began contributing to the French satiric journals *Les Témoins* and *Le Rire*. Thanks to an international agreement between the journals, this also meant that his drawings were published in both the German *Simplizissimus* and *Lustige Blätter* as well as in the Spanish *El Paco* and *El Papitu*. Here the reader could be entertained and provoked by drawings scouring the decadent doings of the international jet set at the horse races in England, on the promenades of the French Riviera, and at the nightclubs of Paris. At home in Bucharest he continued to scourge the decadent habitués of the restaurants and the coffeehouses of Bucharest as well as the roulette players of the casinos in Constanța.

If Iosef Iser, like most of his Romanian fellow-artists of that time, had extensive international contacts and experiences, his pupil Marcel Iancu would make his first trip abroad before the age of fifteen, accompanying his parents and his brothers and sister on a trip to Hungary, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, a trip that would be followed by several other trips together with his parents, to Holland for instance, where his greatest experience was, for the first time, to stand in front of a painting by van Gogh. A trip to Italy made an impression as well—according to family legend Marcel had been granted permission to go for a walk alone; when he didn't show up that evening, some carabinieri were sent to look for the lost young man, who finally was found sitting in a gondola making drawings.

If the studies with Iosif Iser and the first trips abroad were decisive for young Marcel Iancu's continued artistic development, the experiences and events of the autumn of 1912 were undoubtedly even more important for his career, which soon would make a profound impression not only on the Romanian but also the international artistic and literary avant-garde. That autumn, just after being registered at the Gheorghe Lazăr lyceum in Bucharest, Marcel Iancu and his friends Samuel Rosenstock, Eugen Iovanaki, Paul (Poldi) Chapier, and Jacques Costin,<sup>15</sup> all of them more or less of the same age, founded the short-lived literary journal *Simbolul*, whose

inaugural issue was published on 25 October and which would exist up to its sixth issue during the spring of 1913. According to his biographer, the German scholar Harry Seiwert, Marcel Iancu was responsible for the journal's graphic design and its illustrations; at the same time, through his parents, he apparently saw to it that the financial basis of the reckless enterprise was enough.<sup>16</sup>

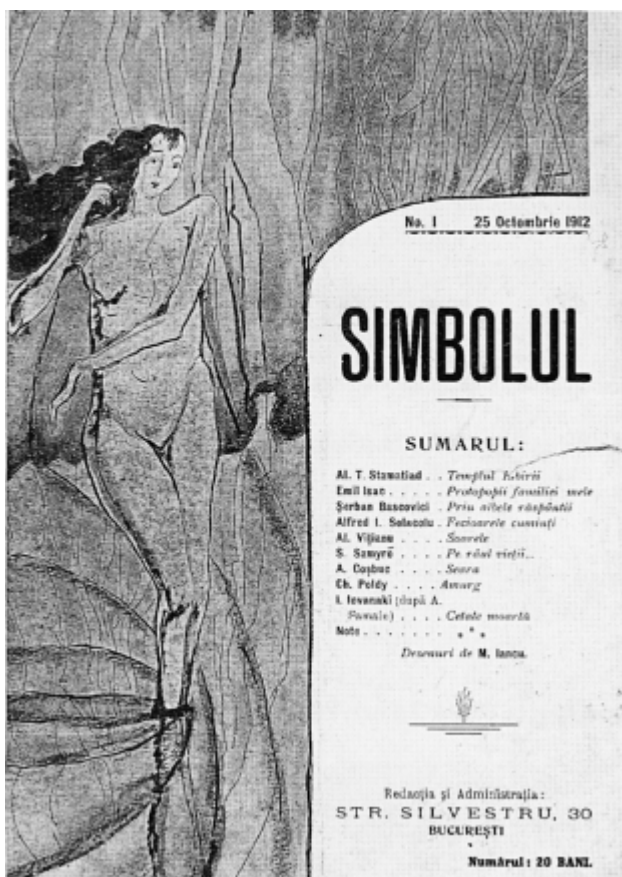


FIGURE 4.4

*Simbolul*, no. 1,  
 25 October 1912.





**FIGURE 4.5**

The circle of *Simbolul* in 1912: from left to right, Samuel Rosenstock, unknown, Marcel Iancu, Iuliu Iancu, Poldi Chapier, and Eugen Iovanaki. Muzeul Literaturii Române, Bucharest.

Already the title, together with the fact that both Alexandru Macedonski and Ion Minulescu, the best-known of the Romanian symbolist poets of that time, had their contributions published in the journal, reveals that the magazine was closely related to symbolism, in Romania explicitly protesting both against Eminescu's romanticism and against samanatorism and poporanism. Marcel Iancu's somewhat awkwardly drawn cover vignette depicting a seminude woman in front of a curtain suggesting a veil of organically twisting ornaments awakens the suspicion either that he had not yet found his own personal mode of expression or that he simply had to adjust his expression to the Secession or Jugendstil so highly admired by the symbolists. His own preferences were soon closer to Cézanne and cubist-influenced modes of expression than to the aesthetic of organic ornaments which the other members of the editorial board preferred and which also more or less corresponded to the literary content of the journal. The drawings and vignettes are, so to speak, up to date, containing the standard set of rhetorical figures of international symbolism, the same figures that were so popular in contemporary symbolist journals, both Western and Central European, which also shows to what an extent a group of pupils of upper secondary schools in Bucharest were informed about what was going on in the international context. Here you find everything from the young flourishing nude girl to the femme fatale, the lonely tree in the sunset, the grotesque death masks, the naked woman languishing in front of the mirror, and the death on the stormy shore, all in correspondence with the literary content and its symbolist emphasis on existential agony, death, sexuality, and decadence. The sixteen-year-old Samuel Rosenstock writes under his pseudonym S. Samyro, for instance, about how "time covers our white love with its heavy and gray mantle" while the rain is weeping; how the "black forgetfulness is sneaking into our house" and the "wind is singing a hymn" at the same time as love is dying and "time is raining rhythmically outside the windows of my beloved."<sup>17</sup> Adrian Maniu, who after the war became known as one of Romania's most important avant-gardists or at least as one of the major forerunners of the Romanian avant-garde,<sup>18</sup> describes a night in May when the birds are flying like "mouth organs made of metal sheets" and two women are standing in the doorway shouting to those who don't want to come closer and driving away those who want to stay. One of the women is sitting on her heels with her neck gushing down her bosom speaking with a voice that seems to come from a throat of rotten rubber, the other is

behaving like a hen being trained to fly. Nearby a bat takes wing “blossoming like a prayer” while it is more possible than ever before to feel that it has a sweet scent of a bad perfume.<sup>19</sup> Maniu had already been published in the symbolist poet Ion Minulescu’s short-lived journal *Insula*<sup>20</sup> and had published his collection of poems *Figuri de ceara*<sup>21</sup> in the same year as he contributed to *Simbolul*. Even though he was more or less influenced by “classical” symbolism, he had already moved by now in the direction of a kind of dissonant and discordant absurdism, which is also evident in the short story “Mirela” published in the third issue of *Simbolul*, in which Maniu tells of a man called Brutus whose letters to his uncle are always returned unopened, “maybe because they are without stamps,” or perhaps because the uncle cannot read his handwriting, or for the simple reason that the uncle’s servants are so polite. Brutus complains to his beloved Mirela, who travels to the uncle to persuade him to help Brutus get a decent job but has to return unsuccessful. Eventually Brutus realizes that he is a bad writer and accuses all the women in the world of being horribly ungrateful and infamous. Brutus is sitting in a poor and damp room where the trousers are hanging at the door “cleverly placed” to prevent the cold of winter from blowing right through the room, and finally he thinks that he hears a voice calling: “commit suicide, Brutus, commit suicide.”<sup>22</sup>

Another of the contributors to *Simbolul*, Alfred Solacolu, writes about two virgins who, startled by the mysterious shadows of the dawn, are lying on a small sofa tightly embracing each other feeling how the warmth from their bodies caressed by the friendly night penetrates their blouses. They are not thinking of anything particular but feel that a man would disrupt their bodily harmony, those bodies which are shaped by the masterly hands of love and by their own wide-open senses “like a flesh-eating flower waiting for insects.” They meet in a long kiss in which their lips melt together in a mouthful of fire while their mutual madness and their lust transformed into madness darken their intellects and thus hasten their happiness being transformed into satanic convulsions.<sup>23</sup> In turn, Claudia Millian, who seems to have been the only woman in the company, invites the casual stroller to look up into the sky to search for the star that one thousand nine hundred years ago guided the three Magi to the greatest symbolist poet of humankind, to the most holy of holy kings, to him who conquered falsehood and madness. And—of course—any such stroller discovers

that the sign in the sky has gone out and that any friend could sell you anytime with a Judas kiss.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that already the first issue of *Simbolul* contained a somewhat absurd short story that takes place in the Jewish environment with which all of the members of the company behind the journal must have been very much acquainted is quite remarkable as well.<sup>25</sup> The story is also explicitly aimed against Nicolae Iorga and his anti-Semitism, telling how Iorga—obviously—has written that the narrator Emil Isac’s omitting to properly pay homage to the great historian and philosopher Nicolae Iorga is due to the simple fact that Isac is a Jew. The narrator Emil Isac begins his story by telling of his large and glorious family of wealthy aunts and priests, priests, priests, and priests again, always priests. At the moment the family consists of three priests, of whom the first is very old, the next one is a little younger, has five children, plays the flute, and eats and drinks enormously, while the third is the youngest though he is about seventy years old and has a wife of twenty-eight. The narrator has many other relatives—lords of castles, barons, lawyers, doctors, hysterical women, and venerable matrons—but none of them pays any attention to him. The priests, on the other hand, love him as a lost son and give him all kinds of presents: eggs, old ideas, holy books, and “pagan wine.” One day, when the narrator, a “decadent joker,” wished to die and already lay on his deathbed, both his creditors, bringing along wine and bills, cookies and threats, and his closest friends paid him a visit. One of the friends smoked his cigarettes, another read his love letters, a third drank his wine, a fourth took all his money, while a fifth stole his wallet, simply because they were his best friends. Finally the priests came as well. The oldest one invited the narrator to return to God, gave him money, and left the house. The next gave him a couple of eggs, accused him of not believing in the power of the prayer, and invited him to his vineyard next autumn. The third, the youngest of the priests, came together with his wife and invited him to come to stay with them, also next autumn. The wife was delighted, the priest not.

Marcel Iancu himself said of the time of *Simbolul* that his generation tried to revolt against the artistic and literary establishment by “unveilings, philosophy, and passion,”<sup>26</sup> and it is most obvious that *Simbolul* put itself in the forefront of the fight against prevailing literary and cultural values and norms. With its unconventional prose and its new, subversive poetic images and metaphors, the journal was

inspired by the antibourgeois and in many respects bohemian symbolism, while at the same time it contained absurd elements almost totally unfamiliar to the symbolist approach. The lack of national motifs was also remarkable within the framework of a culture in which almost every expression of whatever kind was connected in one way or another to the Romanian nation or the Romanian people and its historical mission.

With *Simbolul* Marcel Iancu had taken the first steps on the road to the Meierei and Cabaret Voltaire. Indeed, the ground was thoroughly prepared.

On 26 June 1914 Iuliu Iancu reported to the authorities in Zurich that he was a lodger of a certain Dr. Heuscher on 27 Schmelzbergstraße, and it is more than probable, according to Harry Seiwert,<sup>27</sup> that his brother Marcel accompanied him to Switzerland as soon as he had finished the spring semester at the Gheorghe Lazăr lyceum, though his name doesn't show up in official papers until 14 December two years later. Inspired by the art of André Derain, which had been reproduced, for instance, in the journal *Seara*, where he was being trained as a graphic artist, and at the same time inspired by the lively discussions in Bucharest about Apollinaire's *Alcools* just after its publication in 1913, Marcel Iancu planned to visit both Munich and Cologne to see the Sonderbund exhibition and works of Cézanne, van Gogh, and Picasso.<sup>28</sup> But this was not the main reason for leaving Romania: he had simply given way to his father's exhortations to study and get a proper profession beside his involvement in art.<sup>29</sup>

It is not made clear why the brothers had selected Zurich out of all the cultural capitals of Europe even before the war broke out in August, and not, for instance, Munich or Paris (following a more or less explicit Romanian tradition among intellectual middle-class families); but as soon as the war had begun the reason for their staying in Zurich must have been the simple fact that Switzerland stayed neutral, even though Romanian citizens were not directly affected because their country had not yet entered the war, which would not happen until August 1916 when Romania joined the Entente and crossed into Hungarian territory in Transylvania. In any case, both of the brothers were registered at the University of Zurich in November 1914 for studies in "Phil. II," Marcel in chemistry and Iuliu in mathematics. During the summer of 1915 Marcel Janco took part in Dr. Wendling's private preparatory course for the

institute of technology. At about the same time as the third brother Georges arrived in Zurich in September, both Marcel and Jules left the university; in the exit certificate it was stated that they had not given any cause for complaint.

In the spring of 1915, Marcel Janco took part in the entrance examinations of the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule; his brother Georges later applied for the academic year 1917–1918, while Jules Janco continued his studies at the university. At the examinations Marcel Janco got 4.7 of 6 possible points and could therefore start his architectural studies in the same autumn, though in the end he never graduated because he failed his final examinations in July 1919.

According to Seiwert, it is most probable that Marcel Janco at the beginning of his stay in Zurich stayed at Dr. Heuscher's on Schmelzbergstraße together with Jules, because there is no information about any other address. At the beginning of the academic year of 1915–1916 all three brothers were in Zurich and stayed together at Pension Altinger on 21 Fraumünsterstraße, where a certain Samuel Rosenstock, already calling himself Tristan Tzara, rented a room for about a year after his arrival in Zurich during that autumn, which indicates that he had been in contact with some of the Janco brothers long before his sudden departure from Bucharest and that these now quickly resumed their interrupted association. Zurich was a relatively expensive city, and for a long time the Janco brothers were dependent on contributions from one of their father's business partners while sometimes having to earn their living as music hall artists. How well they succeeded in getting longer engagements is unknown, though it is known that Marcel Janco didn't succeed in selling any of his paintings. This may have been the main reason why the brothers left Pension Altinger to live on Manageplatz from September to November 1916 before they moved to 12 Obere Zäune. In October 1917 the contribution from their father or his partner must have increased substantially, because Georges suddenly could afford to rent an apartment for all three brothers on 33 Rämistraße in the fashionable district of Café Odéon and Café de la Terrasse, where Marcel stayed until 1918 when he was able to move to an apartment of his own on 97 Minervastraße. According to two preserved photos, the apartment on Rämistraße at least had a bourgeois character suitable for an extremely well-dressed son of a wealthy *comerciant* in Bucharest.

Marcel Janco began his studies at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule during the autumn of 1915 together with more than forty other students, of whom about ten were foreigners. The first academic year included separate courses in geometry, landscape and figure drawing, landscape gardening, contemporary French and Belgian drawing, aesthetics, German Renaissance philosophy, and, strangely enough, “Stanley and his journeys in Africa.” Two of his professors became more important for Marcel Janco’s art and career than the others. The first of these was the painter and sculptor Johann Jakob Graf, who was responsible for the courses in sketching, sculpture, anatomy, freehand drawing, and watercolor painting. After his studies in Paris at the beginning of the 1880s he had become known mainly for his public commissions, among them the portal of the Fraumünsterkirche in Zurich. The other professor was the architect Karl Moser, who entered upon his professorship in architecture the same semester as Marcel Janco began his studies. Like Graf, Moser too had studied in Paris—at the École des Beaux-Arts—at the beginning of the 1880s and from then on developed from a typical nineteenth-century historicism toward a moderate Jugendstil and further on toward an unaffected and self-controlled neoclassicism.

It is clear that Marcel Janco, delivering the first of two major lectures at the ETH in February 1918, indirectly referred to Karl Moser’s ideas about, for instance, the architectural building as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and his emphasis on the importance of an intimate cooperation between the arts.<sup>30</sup> Like Moser, Janco too emphasized the completeness and the totality of the building, the “simple crystal shape” and the organic clarity of the building, which shouldn’t “get dirty” by unnecessary details and other disturbing, irrelevant elements. According to Moser, the organic treatment of space is the *raison d’être* of architecture. Moreover, Moser constantly emphasized the importance of close collaboration between architects, painters, and sculptors. The fact that Marcel Janco followed Moser’s principles is also revealed by a couple of preserved watercolors representing designs for interiors, where the walls are entirely covered with paintings in an abstract expressionist style.

The second part of Marcel Janco’s lecture, on cubism, abstract art, and architecture, proves his concern with the relationship between painting and architecture, as well as his opinion that architecture, interior architecture mainly, and painting should come closer to each other, again because of the development of abstract art. Modern interior architecture demands the removal of paintings hanging on walls and the ap-

plication of abstract paintings drawn directly on the wall surface. According to Janco, the painted image must be “built” like a kit using colors, lines, points, and surfaces, almost in the same way as he himself composed the famous (but now lost) painting of 1916 that Hans Arp described as a form of “zigzag naturalism,” depicting Cabaret Voltaire with Hugo Ball sitting by the piano surrounded by the other members of the company, among them Emmy Hennings dancing with Friedrich Glauser;<sup>31</sup> or in the way he composed *Bal à Zurich*, painted the year before and inspired by both futurism and cubism (and which got its sequel two years later in a less dynamic painting, also called *Bal à Zurich*, today at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem). The fact that cubism was very much the topic of the day in Bucharest is shown by the fact that Gleizes’s and Metzinger’s early attempt to theoretically formulate its direction was immediately published in *Simbolul*.<sup>32</sup> While Janco, in his lecture, rejects the Renaissance, mannerism, and the baroque style, he refers with great appreciation to “negro art,” Greek, Etruscan, Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic art and talks about “the freedom of the composition,” “the great line of the material,” and “the faith in the spiritual.” “Illusion is a swindle,” he says and points for instance at Mantegna, Veronese, Raphael, and the impressionists, while artists like van Gogh, Derain, Matisse, and Picasso get his full recognition. About Picasso he says, for instance, that “the purity of the thought becomes clear by the distorted motif”: according to him, determined spiritual expression cannot be represented objectively if the image is not deformed and distorted.

In his second lecture at the ETH Marcel Janco celebrates cubism above all, which he characterizes as “purification painting” enclosing “the necessity of vision.” In contrast to the unrestrained hysteria of impressionism, cubism brings order to the emotional expression—art must, according to Janco, remain as free as possible from any other consideration than that of art itself and at the same time must try to express and represent the unconventional and unconscious, because art itself emerges out of the unconscious and speaks to our inner sensibility. “To everybody who wants art to be free from conventions,” Janco says, “it must be clear that you must live with unconventional forms to love them.”

While it may not be so difficult to understand why Marcel Janco never finished his studies, it is somewhat surprising that, despite everything, he decided to run the risk of failing in the final test. The reason for the failure is very simple: there was not



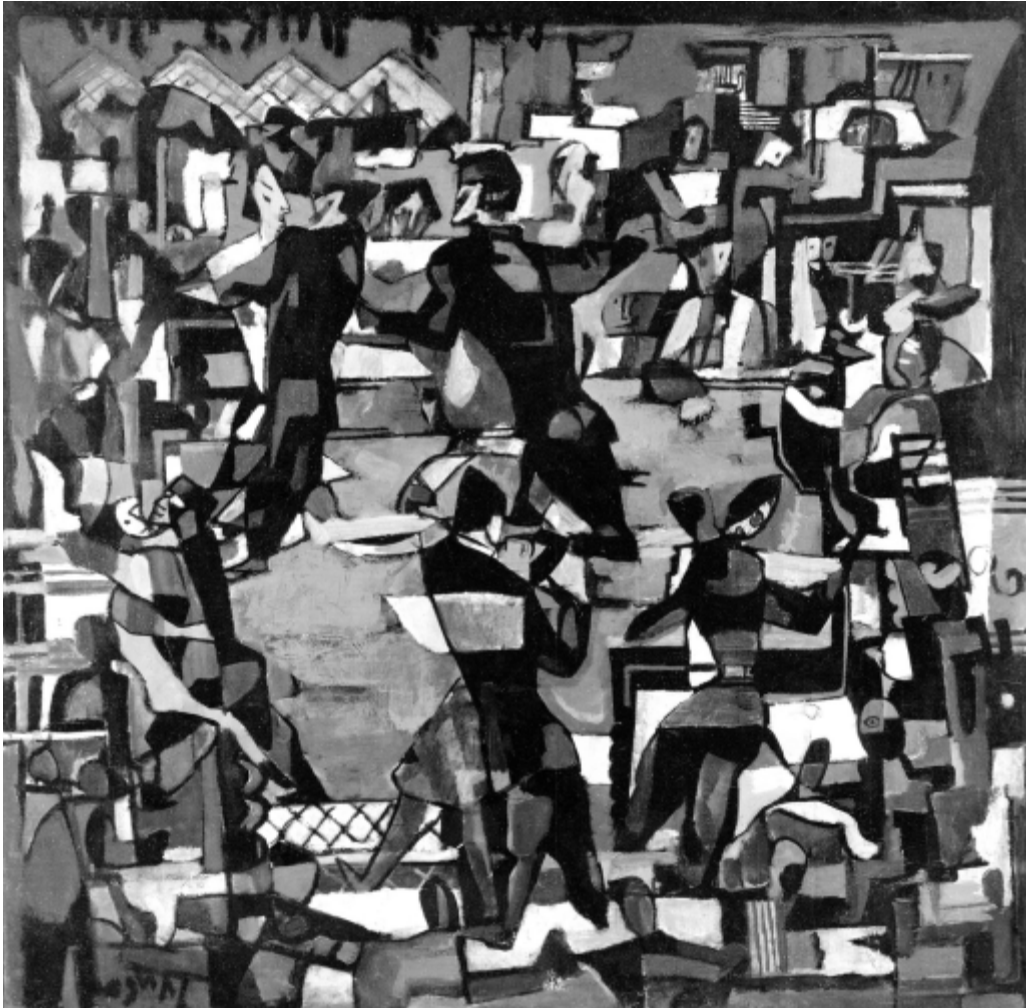
FIGURE 4.6

Marcel Janco, *Bal à*

*Zurich*, 1915. Tel Aviv

Museum of Art, Tel Aviv.





**FIGURE 4.7**

Marcel Janco, *Bal à Zurich*, 1917.

Photo: David Harris. The Israel

Museum, Jerusalem.

enough time because of his engagement in the Dada movement, and later because of his engagement in the artist groups called *Das Neue Leben* and *Die Radikale Künstler* in 1918 and in 1919 respectively. From the night when the young Romanian student took part in the first performance at the *Meierei*, the time was to become unusually hectic, to say the least of it, a time that Marcel Janco himself described about forty years later as an unforgettable experience without any chance of peace and quiet.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fact that fine arts, not to speak of architecture, played a proportionately small role in the Dada movement, Marcel Janco was an active participant from the beginning, artistically, organizationally, and, according to Seiwert, even financially; within a few weeks of the first night he was commissioned to design the poster for the “*Chant Nègre*” performance on 31 May showing two black women in cubist style, a vignette which then was recycled in the leaflet for the so-called *Sturm soirée* at *Galerie Dada* in 1917. Early in the spring of 1916 Marcel Janco also drew the portraits of Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, and Richard Huelsenbeck that were published in the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire*, at the same time as he made eight linocuts for Tzara’s *Antipyrine*. *Cabaret Voltaire* gave the twenty-year-old student his first chance to exhibit his art alongside professional artists like Hans Arp, Marinetti, August Macke, Modigliani, Picasso, Otto van Rees, Marcel Slodki, and Arthur Segal, an exhibition that soon was to be followed by scores of other opportunities to show at both *Galerie Corray* and *Galerie Dada* together with both the “veterans” of the Dada movement and artists such as Viking Eggeling, Max Ernst, Lyonel Feininger, Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, Alfred Kubin, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Oppenheimer, and Fritz Baumann.

The fact that Marcel Janco never lost contact with his friends in Bucharest either is affirmed by a letter from Ion Vinea in July 1916, from which we can conclude that Vinea, the key figure of the emerging Romanian avant-garde still left in Bucharest, was thoroughly informed about the events in Zurich and that he had received Janco’s poster as well: “Marcel, I like your poster very much: you have been at the height of your efforts for two years. And now, in which direction will you go? . . . [Tudor] Arghezi said, critically, that you cannot say whether a person is talented or not on the basis of only one drawing. Rubbish.”<sup>34</sup> On the whole Vinea’s letter is a short piece of absurd prose, or a boyish joke between the two friends of the former *Simbolul* circle, but it also reveals how much Vinea himself longed to take part in the activities



FIGURE 4.8  
Restaurant Meierei,  
Spiegelgasse,  
Zurich, c. 1935.

in Zurich, as he, directly referring to Cabaret Voltaire, explains that, despite the distance, he is “terribly” inclined to contribute with a couple of “ne plus ultra” poems—“Please, give me a theme, give me a theme.” Vinea begins the letter by complaining about stomach pains:

*Brother, since this morning I have had a terrible stomach ache! Maybe my genius is suffering as well. To cure myself, I had to drink two glasses of cold water, which became my alarm clock, as I had to let the water run until it was cold enough and as I had to wait with the glass in my hand. Furthermore, after that I had to submit my room to an extremely disparaging exercise. With my hands on the sideboard I bowed almost to the floor and went round and round a couple of times. Every time I bowed, my head weighed several tons, I felt that my head—as if it were decapitated—was of no use, like a pinhead of steel at the end of my body. The pain left me little by little, but to achieve this I had to eat all my medicine, therefore I had to leave my arse at the mercy of the washstand like a tart.*

*If you want, you can spread this prescription all over the world in the journal DADA. Or guard it jealously. In any case, this secrecy of Mrs. Hennings will be unveiled. You promised to send translations of her poems; I had to restrict myself to the one I found in your booklet: die hochaufgetürmten Tag . . . if I understand it right, it is very beautiful.*

*I would be stupid if I wasn't dancing to the same tune. The hoax is a wonderful thing, if it is clear-sighted and when Tzara pulls faces behind his glasses and Marculica [Marcel] dams up his cascades of laughter with his trumpeter buttocks. Marcel—I like you, because you are just as enthusiastic as unpleasant, and I submit these lines to the quiet Jules.<sup>35</sup>*

As a painter Marcel Janco developed quickly and purposefully already during the first year of his stay in Zurich, although, for instance, a more or less impressionist self-portrait, which he painted in 1911 at only sixteen years old, is already surprisingly secure regarding both the way to handle the material and the specific demands of the style.<sup>36</sup> This is the case also when it comes to the painting *Seiltänzer*, an unusually elegant pseudocubist painting dated 1915, today in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Seiwert holds that Marcel Janco came in contact with futurism through the dadaists, but he must already have been acquainted with the futurist technique of composing the painterly elements on the surface, as is clearly shown by the 1915 painting *Bal à Zurich*. It is not especially surprising either that the dadaist Marcel Janco began work-

ing with nonfigurative, abstract modes of expression as well at the end of 1916, because abstract art expressed the same unconditional honesty as the company that danced, sang, and recited at Cabaret Voltaire, if we are to believe Richard Huelsenbeck in 1920.<sup>37</sup> According to Huelsenbeck, figurative, “naturalistic” painting was equivalent to declaring that you were bankrupt right in the face of the enemy.

At the same time as he dedicated his life to visual art, which by now included not only paintings but also drawings, prints, and abstract wood reliefs, Marcel Janco took part—as we have seen—in performance after performance, the one more scandalous than the other, always at the center of things, always on stage, alone or together with the others. He himself explained many years later that Dada was no tendency in art, no brotherhood, “not a perfume either, not a philosophy.”<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere he states that Dada was no school nor an -ism but “an alarm signal of the spirit against everything cheap, against every routine and all the speculations,” a “bodily art, a force coming from the physical instincts, a heroic art including both seriousness and chance,” the “adventure of man set in freedom.”<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to point to any particular effort in Janco’s exceptionally complex and manifold engagement in Zurich, but the fact that he himself, in defining Dada so thoroughly, emphasizes the bodily aspect indicates that he at least lays the main stress upon the stage performances, which often were pure dance performances and which almost every time included different masks and costumes planned and made by Janco himself. In fact, the connection between, for instance, Rudolf von Laban’s new “ultramodern” dance concept and Janco’s masks seems to be of utmost importance, although the performers occasionally also used dolls made by Emmy Hennings and particularly by Sophie Taeuber, who worked in close contact with Laban’s dance company. On the whole, dancing was very much in vogue in those days, and it is not particularly surprising that dancing played the major role when Galerie Dada, succeeding the Meierei as venue, opened its doors for the first big soirée on 29 March 1917. Nor is it to be wondered at that Mary Wigman, one of Laban’s most important dancers in Monte Verità, had invited the dadaists to a fancy-dress ball a few weeks before the soirée; all the invited participants were asked to dress as “fantastically and cubistically” as possible. Sophie Taeuber, since 1916 a teacher at the school of design and crafts in Zurich, presented one fantastic marionette figure after another, figures that clearly are linked

FIGURE 4.9

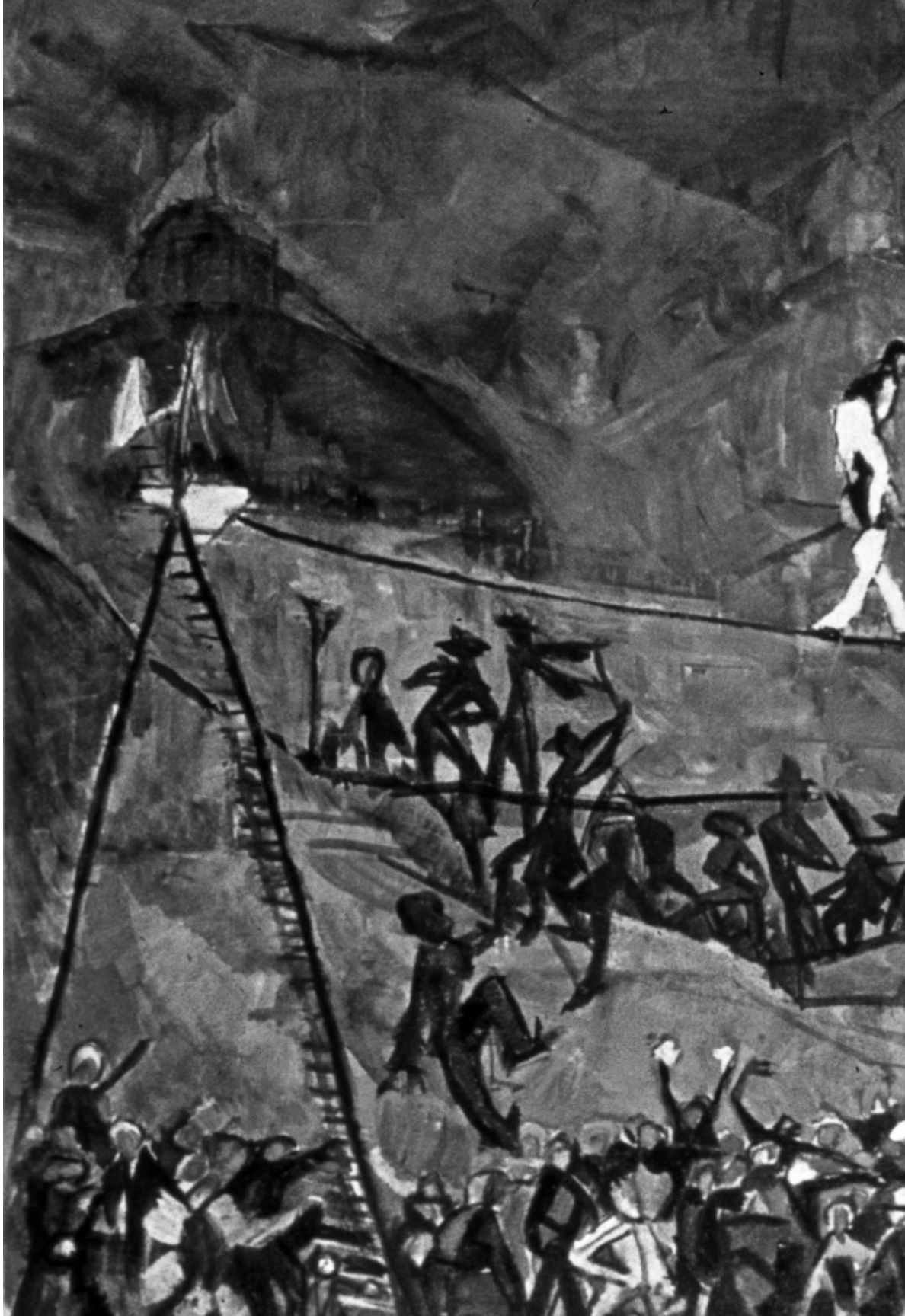
Marcel Janco,

*Seiltänzer*, 1915.

Photo: David Harris.

The Israel Museum,

Jerusalem.







with those figures shown at the Zürcher Theaterkunst exhibition in 1914,<sup>40</sup> at which not only the European puppet show tradition was presented but also Japanese Nō masks and shadow play figures as well as East Asian marionettes. In this context it is remarkable as well that Rudolf Laban de Varaljas, a bohemian, bearded, eccentric, Dionysian satyr, had been born in Pozsony, today's Bratislava, that he spent a great deal of his childhood and adolescence in the Balkans, where his father was military governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina, that he was strongly influenced by the Muslim dervishes as well as by Eastern European folk dances, and last but not least that his uncle was a theater manager in Bucharest, circumstances that were decisively important for his pioneering efforts in regard to modern ecstatic dance.<sup>41</sup>

Emmy Hennings was obviously the first in the Dada group to construct more or less grotesque puppets recalling those by Sophie Taeuber,<sup>42</sup> although there is no evidence for whether the puppets were actually used in the performances or only hung on the walls of the Meierei. But already the fact that they were presented in the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire* indicates their symbolic value, together with the fact that they actually were used at the opening of Galerie Dada in Sprünglihaus on Bahnhofstraße. However, Emmy Hennings apparently did not make more than a handful of puppets—already at the big soirée at Zunfthaus zur Waag on 14 July 1916 she was dressed in a costume too similar to Hugo Ball's "bishop's dress" at the same soirée not to have been planned and made by Marcel Janco. She read poems and danced a grotesque Dada dance dressed in a horrible mask and something that is described as a cardboard tube from top to toe. The only thing one saw of the body was the naked feet with which she stamped on the ground while reciting nonsense verses and crying out incomprehensible words and sounds. In his diary Hugo Ball characterizes Janco's masks as "more than just clever," reminiscent of the Japanese or Greek theater yet still "totally modern."<sup>43</sup>

Marcel Janco was responsible also for both the stage management and the masks when the dadaists presented Oskar Kokoschka's absurd play *Spinx und Strohmann*, written in 1913, at the so-called Sturm soirée at Galerie Dada on 14 April 1917,<sup>44</sup> one of the most memorable and at the same time one of the most scandalous performances within the Dada movement as such. The evening began without provocations worth mentioning, with texts by Alfred Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise Cendrars, and F. T. Marinetti together with fragments by Jakob van Hoddis and Wassily Kandin-

sky, but soon dissolved into a far more hectic speed when Laban's pupils stepped forward to perform "musique et danse nègre" to Hugo Ball's confusing choreographic instructions. Dressed as "negresses" in black caftans and masks, the five dancers moved symmetrically accompanied by a strongly emphasized rhythm that was deformed in an "ugly" way as the dance came to an end, totally dissolved. The play itself was performed in two adjoining rooms, the performers being dressed in body masks defined by Hugo Ball as "tragic." Ball himself played the part of Firdusi dressed like a gigantic straw puppet that constantly swung its arms and legs, a body mask so big that Ball was easily able to read inside its case. Electric bulbs inside the mask shone through the eyes, which, according to the performer himself, must have looked strange in the darkened rooms. Emmy Hennings stepped forward as Anima, the female soul, the only one who didn't carry a mask, performing half like a sylph, half like an angel, in lilac and blue. Wolfgang von Hartmann played the part of the caoutchouc man while Friedrich Glauser represented the grim reaper. Tristan Tzara provided for lightning and thunder in the back room and also played the part of a parrot constantly repeating "Anima, sweet Anima!" At the same time he took care of the entries and the exits, creating a total chaos that yet produced the impression of a conscious effect of the stage management. The language was filled with clichés, stereotyped phrases, incomprehensible aphorisms, and pure nonsense, for the most part terribly uninteresting yet almost lamenting. Tzara was totally unsuccessful in synchronizing the sound effects as well as the entries and the exits, and eventually, of course, the performers tumbled down on each other in an indescribable tangle of spotlights and cords. All light went out and chaos broke out in the pitch-black rooms in this fantastic *commedia dell'arte* performance.

The last time Marcel Janco's skills in planning and making grotesque masks and costumes were put to use was at the biggest Dada soirée ever, the one Tristan Tzara organized in the Saal zur Kaufleuten on 9 April 1919 and of which it can be said that it marked the culmination of Dada activities in Zurich.<sup>45</sup> According to Tzara's own Zurich chronicle, an impossible 1,500 persons filled the hall, "boiling in the bubbles of bamboulas," to take part in the performance staged by both Hans Richter and Hans Arp.<sup>46</sup> The program was divided into three parts and began as so often before fairly calmly, with a serious, witty, and extremely boring lecture by Viking Eggeling about the basic principles of abstract art, according to Tzara about "the line proper to

a painting of the future.” After this Suzanne Perrottet played a short piece by Erik Satie, according to Tzara a musical irony or “non-music of the jemenfoutiste goofy child.” As the program continued the audience began to fidget more and more irritably. When the shaded stage was revealed with twenty persons reciting Tristan Tzara’s simultaneous poem “The Fever of the Male,” the scandal assumed menacing proportions as islands spontaneously formed in the hall, accompanying, multiplying, underlining the mighty roaring gesture and the simultaneous orchestration. Cries, whistling, deafening laughter—“Signal of the blood.” The second “act” of the performance began with Hans Richter, elegant and malicious, wishing the distinguished audience to hell, whereupon Hans Heusser played anti-music, Suzanne Perrottet danced an abstract dance, and Hans Arp read from his *Wolkenpumpe*, “under enormous oval.” The real scandal broke out when Walter Serner, a Czech writer active in Ascona, according to Hans Richter a moralist and a cynic,<sup>47</sup> a nihilist who loved mankind, a sort of aristocrat of Dada always wearing a monocle or pince-nez, took the floor to read his manifesto *Letzte Lockerung*, which he had written the year before and according to which “everything is a bluff, dear friends—art is dead. Vive Dada!”<sup>48</sup> Serner got more and more excited sitting on a chair with his back to the audience and dressed as if he was attending his own wedding in frock coat, striped trousers, and gray necktie. Carrying a dressmaker’s dummy, he suddenly returned to one of the back rooms to fetch a bouquet of artificial flowers; he let the headless figure smell the flowers, then lay them at its feet, sat again on the chair, and continued with his anarchistic credo, according to which, for instance, every psychology is a handicap in the same way as every rule has an exception, which means that every exception is always a rule: behind every sentence you must indicate a wild laughter that cannot be misunderstood as well as behind every apparent play of the muscles, otherwise you are—a serious man. Of course, the performance came to an end in a total catastrophe, a total crash—“delirium in the hall,” Tzara tells us. The audience, crying and howling, started furiously to throw coins, orange peels, and insulting words onto the stage. According to Serner himself, one had, after all, to admire the calmness of the reader, who surrounded by the uproar remained motionless in his chair until he eventually left the stage with a gesture that couldn’t be misunderstood. After a while an infernal row broke out, people ran onto the stage, grabbed Serner, and threw him out of the building. The entire hall was revolting, the audience transformed into a mob.

Art is dead—long live Dada! According to Tzara, Dada had “succeeded in establishing the circuit of absolute unconsciousness in the audience which forgot the frontiers of education of prejudices, experienced the commotion of the NEW.”

Although Marcel Janco still participated with his masks and strange costumes in the Dada activities in both the Sturm soirée and the performance in the Saal zur Kaufleuten, and also contributed drawings, woodcuts, and linocuts to several of the dadaists’ publications, his interest in the most radical expressions had begun to decrease. At the same time it seems fairly clear that he was trying to find other professional hunting grounds, and already in 1917, when the second phase of the Dada adventure had begun with the second and final departure of Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings and the closure of Galerie Dada, Marcel Janco felt that the movement had passed “the first speed, the negative speed.”<sup>49</sup> According to Geo Șerban, Janco’s personality was driven in two distinct directions. On the one hand, he felt an inner urge to break rules, to get rid of frozen canons, while on the other hand he abhorred gregarious nihilism and “that kind of contestation that would soon melt into dissolving extravagance.”<sup>50</sup> He fit perfectly into the carnival-like ambience of Cabaret Voltaire because he himself was attracted by the explosive meanings of the grotesque play with masks and let himself get caught into those histrionic impromptus of simultaneous dialogues filled with anticonformist joyfulness. According to Șerban, Marcel Janco never claimed to be a dadaist himself *à tout prix*. He was much more interested in identifying himself with constructivist ideas. He would rather call himself a radical artist, equally withdrawing from the narrow conservative spirit that would feed on borrowed formulas from the obsolete vocabulary of aesthetic illusion, and from the philistine flirting with that superficial avant-garde ready to shock a perplexed public, “a victim in a deceitful play.” Janco was a pragmatist opposing the excessive subjectivity of the romantic tradition. In 1923 the Romanian playwright Victor Eftimiu who took his subjects from classical mythology, obviously a person whom no one expected to share avant-garde views, recalled his meeting with the young painter in that high-spirited Zurich, where he “would work bravely and passionately in search of the golden fires that lay buried in every man’s soul” in order to set them free from “all that is stale and deadly sweet in them.” According to him, Janco was a man who always avoided comfortable success, a man who never stopped

but went beyond his own goals and surpassed himself in everything he did. Novelty itself did not attract him—he rather tried to solve the conflict between the traditional and the modern on a “higher level of integration.”<sup>51</sup>

As soon as the peace treaty had been signed in Versailles, the dadaists lost their exclusive role as an oppositional group of exiles.<sup>52</sup> They lost much of their audience when the foreign cultural elite returned to their native countries. Generally speaking, the conflict was deepened as well between what the artists were producing in their closed studios and what was presented in public. Furthermore, Janco’s theoretical reflections on his own artistic position and his experiments with pure abstract plaster reliefs were difficult to combine with the destructive nihilism of the Dada soirées. Janco himself felt that a more or less distinct line of division had begun to crystallize between, on the one hand, Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Walter Serner, “the great poets and protagonists of Dada” who occasionally came quite close to a total rejection of art as a whole, and, on the other hand, Hans Arp, Hans Richter, and Janco himself, who still supported art with a capital A and who at the same time searched for new ways of expressing inner feelings and experiences.<sup>53</sup> Almost forty years after the conflict, Marcel Janco indicated that the friend of his youth Tristan Tzara was the villain of the piece by referring to Tzara’s ability to make art out of impertinences and mystifications. To Janco Tzara was the master of puns and abortive jokes who had been famous and coveted everywhere. His stubbornness, which helped him to achieve world fame, distanced the artists from Dada—“We couldn’t agree any more on the importance of Dada, and the misunderstandings accumulated.”<sup>54</sup>

Marcel Janco is not alone in referring to Tristan Tzara’s aspirations and his efforts for his own fame. From the very beginning Tzara did everything possible to transform Dada into a movement in the grand style, passionately building up for himself a global network on the basis of the idea that Zurich was the headquarters of the movement and Tzara himself its managing director. To Friedrich Glauser he admitted that his conscious ambition was to constitute a new art movement.<sup>55</sup> Marinetti’s worldwide fame left him no peace, and he dreamed of having the same reputation. Dada sounds so much better than futurism, and the public is so stupid. Within a few weeks of Huelsenbeck’s arrival in Zurich, in April 1916 Tzara took the initiative to formalize the activities and to establish a “Gesellschaft Voltaire,” an association whose main task would be to organize big international exhibitions, publish a journal

of its own, and deliver a manifesto of the new movement. Both Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck were skeptical about the propagandistic ideas, and soon the conflict between Ball and Tzara was difficult if not impossible to hide, which may also have been one of the reasons why Ball and Emmy Hennings left Zurich right after the “bishop episode.” Hugo Ball too, the unsuccessful playwright at the Kammerspiele in Munich, longed for recognition and fame, at the same time finding it difficult to conform to pompous speeches and appeals, while young Samuel Rosenstock from the “province” of Romania tried everything possible to satisfy the same burning longing, with the help of means directly opposed to Ball’s pronounced Nietzschean individualism.

The fact that Marcel Janco was already planning his final departure from the Dada movement in 1918 is proved also by his participation in the exhibition “Neue Kunst” at Kunstsalon Wolfsberg in Zurich, held in September of that year, in the company of artists such as Hans Arp, Fritz Baumann, Hans Richter, and Otto Morach. The exhibition can hardly be characterized as particularly radical or subversive in regard to prevailing aesthetic standards, as is witnessed also by the fact that the board of the exhibition hall excluded works by Francis Picabia only a few days before the opening. Janco had already for some years been close to the artist group *Moderne Bund*, and apparently the *Bund* artist Fritz Baumann now introduced him to the group *Das Neue Leben*,<sup>56</sup> which since April had been gathering around Baumann in Basel and which consisted of Otto Morach, Oscar Lüthy, Niklaus Stoecklin, and Alexander Zschokke, among others. Baumann had experienced on the spot the triumph of modern art in Paris, Munich, Rome, and Berlin. Immediately after its constitution the group had turned to the *Basler Kunstverein* with an application to show “expressionistic” works, an exhibition that would not draw any distinct line between fine arts and applied art and which was held in November-December in that same year with artists like Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Oscar Lüthy, and Ernst Kissling alongside two distinguished Romanians: Marcel Janco and Arthur Segal. The core of the group was relatively small. Apparently a third Romanian as well—Tristan Tzara—was involved in some way or another in its activities, because he delivered a lecture on modern art at the occasion of its second big exhibition at *Kunsthaus Zürich* in January 1919.

According to Marcel Janco, *Das Neue Leben* tried to lay the foundations for a “new social aesthetics,” and therefore it is not surprising that the group made efforts

also to “educate” the public with the help of lecture evenings instead of the exhilarating Dada soirées. On 3 April 1919 Fritz Baumann answered the question “What does the Neue Leben want?,” while the writer Otto Flake gave an “introduction to the understanding of the new art.” The same evening in Basel Marcel Janco talked about “l’art abstrait et ses buts,” strongly emphasizing the importance of pedagogical efforts to “educate” and win the public. Janco was modern enough to oppose narrative, imitative painting, “art anecdotique,” against which he put pure abstract art.<sup>57</sup>

Hans Richter’s participation in the politically radical Berlin Dada in March 1919 may have been one of the major impulses when later in that same year he constituted the Radikale Künstler group alongside, among others, Marcel Janco, Hans Arp, Fritz Baumann, Viking Eggeling, and Otto Morach.<sup>58</sup> The group was clearly influenced by those radical movements in both Central and Eastern Europe that pleaded for an art in the service of the proletariat opposing obsolete bourgeois values; in accordance with this the members also got in touch with the Arbeitsrat für Kunst and other similar socialist- and communist-oriented artist groupings in Munich and elsewhere. According to an unpublished draft outlining the principles of execution, the group would fight to give back to the working class its self-consciousness at the same time as it would execute an art that took the “basis of the spiritual horizon” as its point of departure. Using elevated metaphors and images familiar within literary expressionism, the “manifesto” stated also that the objective of the group was to “rebuild the human community” beyond both materialism and capitalism, thus raising “the common level of existence,” a goal to be reached by using abstract art in its capacity of expressing the “living foundation” of humankind, since abstract expression as such is the very basic form of art and life, the “essentially human.” Here the artist is the fixing agent between the people and the “spiritual layers” of existence, a notion that also corresponds with general ideas in Central and Eastern Europe, where the spiritual and the political aspects of art were mixed together into a profound artistic and political messianism.

From the fact that he was in personal touch with the Arbeitsrat in Munich, which Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut, among others, had founded during the autumn of 1918 as a counterpart to the revolutionary councils of workers and soldiers in the new Soviet Republic, we can conclude also that Marcel Janco, to all appearances, tried to adjust to the spirit of the age. He was also given the responsibility of

planning and editing a journal for the Radikale Künstler at the same time as the group planned to change its name to Arbeitsgemeinschaft Zürich. There were discussions also of inviting Arthur Segal, Oscar Lüthy, and the Russian artist Alexej Jawlensky to take part in the activities of the group and to contribute to the journal together with Gropius and the Italian futurist Enrico Prampolini. The journal, though never launched, would—of course—also have contained a manifesto, which eventually was published in the *Zürcher Post* on 3 May 1919, signed by Marcel Janco alongside Arp, Baumann, Eggeling, Giacometti, Hennings, Helbig, Morach, and Richter, artists who declared that all artists must now actively participate in political life because of the great political changes throughout Europe. According to the manifesto, the radical artists representing a culture in all essentials common to them all would place themselves in the center of society to take over the responsibility for the spiritual development of the state, since “this is our right.” “This is our duty. Such a work guarantees that the people will have a better life and undreamt-of possibilities. We take the initiative.”<sup>59</sup>

If Tristan Tzara had followed the Janco brothers to Zurich in 1915, it looks like a conscious decision that in January 1920 he moved again to the same city to which both Marcel and Jules Janco had moved a month before. It is certainly true that Tzara had received an invitation from André Breton and Francis Picabia to join the avant-garde circles in Paris, and it is likewise true that he was awaited in the French capital as a messiah who would quickly introduce the dadaist philosophy to the curious French avant-garde; but the fact remains that Marcel and Jules Janco had taken the train to Paris already in December 1919.<sup>60</sup> The immediate reason may have been that the war no longer prevented them from visiting the most renowned center of European art and culture, and perhaps most of all the fact that the “lady-killer” Marcel was now steadily associated with Amélie Micheline (Lily) Ackermann, who for the past two months had lived in Paris and who, to all appearances, had come in touch with Marcel through the Laban dancer Maria Vanselow, with whom Georges Janco had associated for a long time. Lily Ackermann, born in Paris in September 1897, earned her living as a milliner in Zurich, where she had been raised by her paternal grandparents; according to Seiwert, the exact day of her first meeting with Marcel Janco is unknown, but already in March 1919 her name is included in the list of collaborators of Das



Neue Leben, and one month later in the minutes of the Radikale Künstler. According to Seiwert, who refers to Marcel Janco's daughter Josine Janco-Starrels's report many years later about her mother's social origin, the fact that the pair got married in Béthune in Flanders shortly after their reunion in Paris may not in the first place have been due to an authentic love relationship between the two but rather to Marcel Janco's more or less conscious rebellion against his father aimed against his own social background, since Janco, the oldest son of a wealthy Jewish family, consciously violated etiquette by marrying a poor Catholic woman of dubious origin, who, furthermore, was said to be uneducated.

It is highly probable, according to Seiwert, that Janco attended the first scandalous soirée of the French dadaists, the "Premier vendredi de Littérature" at the Palais des Fêtes on 23 January 1920, at which Dada was introduced for the first time in Paris and Tristan Tzara was presented in public to the French avant-garde. Probably both Marcel and Jules Janco also met with Breton and Picabia on this occasion,<sup>61</sup> Marcel Janco showing them several architectural sketches. Breton mentions in his correspondence that these sketches amazed him a lot but also that Janco's ideas seemed rather odd to him.<sup>62</sup> During his visit to Paris Janco was also asked to take part in an exhibition organized by Section d'Or at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in March.<sup>63</sup> Although the reports don't conclusively tell whether Marcel Janco actually attended the first soirée, it is quite clear that he didn't turn up when the second performance took place in the Salle Gaucéau four months later, apparently in protest against the fact that the French dadaists consciously refrained from deciding on purely political matters; instead they staged a sort of thrilling, refined performance, a provocative variant of the activist theater of Italian futurism. Marcel Janco dissociated himself from this, packed his suitcases, and left in June 1920 for Béthune together with his brother Jules and his fiancée Lily Ackermann.

Unfortunately we don't have much information about the immediate circumstances of their little more than one-year-long stay in Béthune, a small French provincial town in northeast Flanders with about 16,000 inhabitants; the biggest attraction was the Grand Palais, built in the fourteenth century, seriously damaged during the war. From both a preserved business card and a stamp in H. Verrey's book *Cent cottages et villas anglais* in Janco's private library, now at the museum in Tel Aviv, we may conclude that Janco most likely was the joint owner of the architectural office IANCO

& DEQUIRE on 44 Boulevard Vauban; but Janco himself apparently never told anything about Louis Déquire, an architect who had gotten his education at the office of a certain Degez in Béthune and since 1919 had been engaged by a certain Detrez. Furthermore, Janco's name is not mentioned in the official list of those commissions Déquire had received in his capacity of being responsible for rebuilding in the region just after the war, which he presented in 1927.

Having constantly been engaged at the top level in his capacity as both organizer and activist, Marcel Janco must, undoubtedly, have felt both disappointed and isolated in the small provincial town. Without important commissions, without the lively intercourse, without the daily contacts with Europe's most interesting intellectuals, he must have longed to go somewhere else, but Zurich cannot have been particularly attractive any longer since most of his former friends had left the city. At the same time the visit to Paris had proved unsuccessful. Although the silence around Marcel Janco in Béthune is almost total, we know that the couple lived in Hôtel du Lion d'Or and that they married before November 1920; the ceremony had to be repeated in Bucharest since Janco's family called its legitimacy into question.

Though Janco didn't receive any important commission to add to his qualifications, according to Seiwert one cannot exclude the possibility that he took part in the planning of the small department store Chevalier-Westrelin at Place d'Hinges in the village of Hinges five kilometers north of Béthune, and if this was the only important project in which Janco was involved during his stay in France, it is natural that he seriously began to worry about how to support his family and himself, despite the fact that his parents kept on supplying him and his brothers with large amounts of money.<sup>64</sup> At the same time—according to Seiwert, who relies on an interview with Pierre Restany in 1973—Janco longed to work independently as a professional architect with an office of his own. Furthermore, the parents had made clear that he was needed at home in Bucharest, where several building projects had been started after the peace treaty in 1920, one bigger than the next. Bearing in mind the economic situation and the social isolation, Janco's decision in the autumn of 1921 to return to Romania must not have been a particularly difficult one. Probably his brother Jules accompanied him back to Bucharest as well.



# Little Paris OF THE BALKANS



When Marcel and Iuliu Iancu returned to Romania and Bucharest sometime late in 1921, both the country and its capital had changed fundamentally.<sup>1</sup>

In early 1916, while the Iancu brothers and the other Romanians stood on the stage of Cabaret Voltaire and the world around them was mired in war, their native country remained for the moment in an undefined position, nominally allied with the Central Powers but not actively participating in the war. In due course it would offer its allegiance, along with its natural resources of oil and wheat, in exchange for territories outside the existing kingdom but largely inhabited by ethnic Romanians. The Central Powers promised both Bessarabia and Bukovina to be taken from a defeated Russian empire; the Allies offered Transylvania, the Banat, and other parts of the kingdom of Hungary. In late summer of 1916 the political leadership came to a decision, renounced its treaty with Germany, and entered the war on the side of Russia and the Allies. With disastrous results: its armies were quickly defeated, and within weeks the government capitulated to the Central Powers. Romania was forced to sign a humiliating treaty with Germany in 1918, which let the German army march into Bucharest. The military and the government, sitting in Iași, held back, then reentered the conflict only one week after the Habsburg empire's capitulation and Germany's agreement to an armistice ending the Great War. This time Romania's drive for territory was successful: to the Danubian principalities of the existing kingdom were now joined not only the eastern Banat and all of Transylvania but much of Bukovina and all of Bessarabia as well as further parts of Dobruja, more than doubling the total area of Romania from 130,000 to 295,000 square kilometers. At the same time the new Greater Romania became home to nearly 2 million Hungarians, nearly one and a half million Jews, about 850,000 Germans, 790,000 Ukrainians, Russians, and Ruthenians, and 600,000 Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, and other minorities, which meant that nearly 30 percent of the population consisted of ethnic non-Romanians,<sup>2</sup> whose allegiance to Greater Romania might be questioned. With their presence the "foreignness" that had long characterized Romanian culture would take a new turn during the 1920s, when the avant-garde reached its maturity.<sup>3</sup>

However, the quantity and the multiplicity of the minorities did not prevent either the political leaders or the cultural establishment of the new Greater Romania—*România Mare*—from further reinforcing the old notion of the historical legitimacy of an ethnically homogeneous *Staatsvolk* to govern the country in accor-

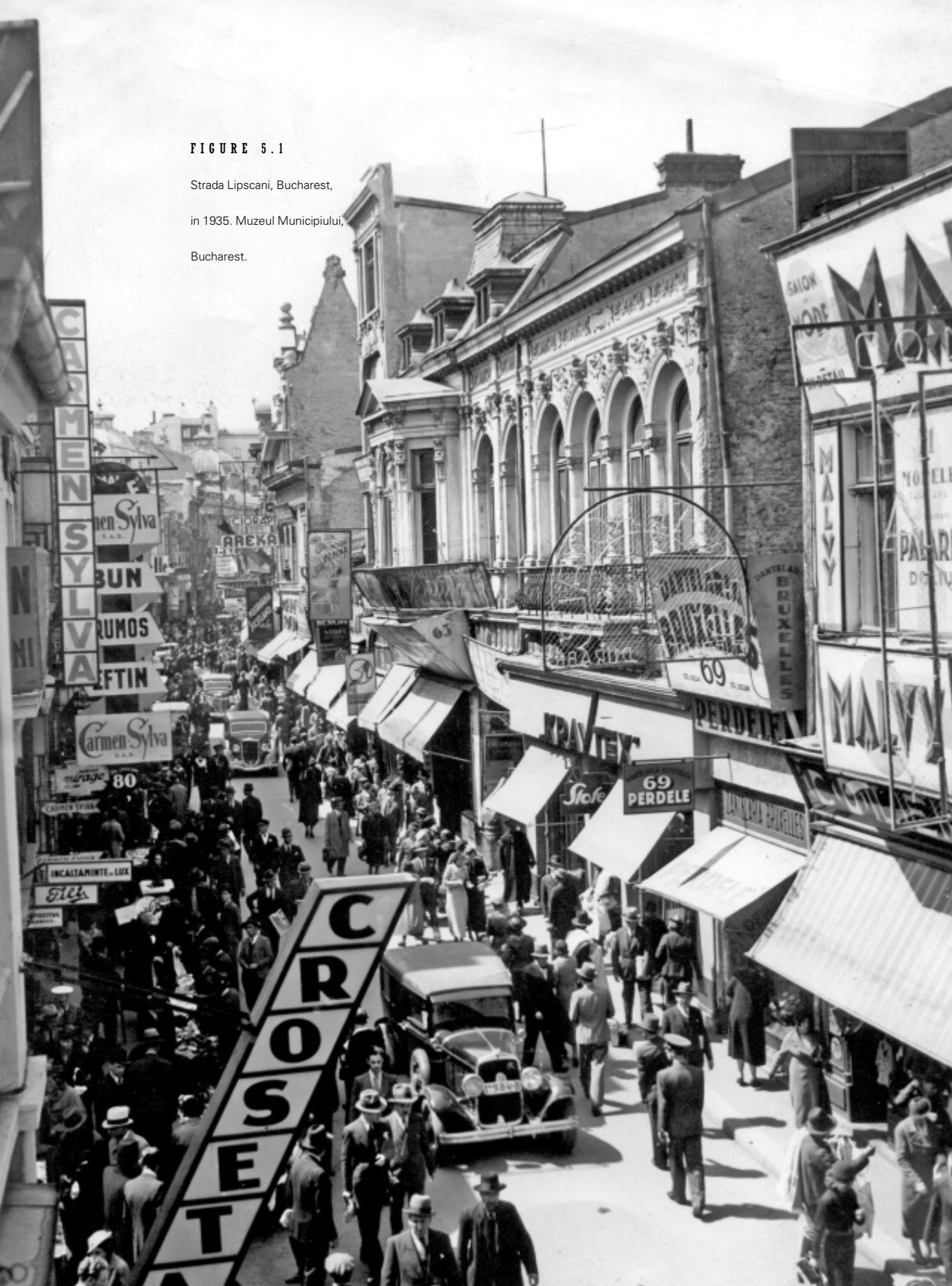
dance with the same principles that were applicable in the principalities.<sup>4</sup> The enlargement of the Romanian territory meant also that the country doubled its natural resources; for instance, the annual production of oil increased from 1.7 million tons before the war to nearly 5 million tons by the end of the 1920s. The oil field in Moreni was extremely rich, and the reserves of coal in the Petroșani basin in the southern part of the Carpathian Mountains appeared to be exceptionally large as well, which meant that the production of coal increased from just above 1 million tons before the war to more than 3 million tons by the end of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> After the war, domestic capital investment as well increased substantially, though it could not be measured against foreign investment, not only in oil, gas, and coal production but also in the production of steel, textiles, chemicals, and food. Already during the year before the signing of the peace treaty a department of reconstruction was established within the ministry of industry and trade. A few years later the National Society for Industrial Credit was created. Thus, industrial investment increased by 116 percent by the 1930s; almost 60 percent of all existing industrial enterprises in 1930 had been created after 1918. In the interwar period Romanian industry grew at an annual rate of 5.4 percent, one of the highest growth rates in the world at that time.

The capital city grew enormously as well. If Bucharest had about 170,000 inhabitants in 1877 and a little more than 280,000 at the turn of the century, the number had increased to 750,000 persons in 1920. By that time about one-third of Bucharest's total area of 50 square kilometers was built upon, with more than 30,000 buildings and about 120 churches.<sup>6</sup> Just after the war large new areas were also planned and came into use, first of all in the north, where, for instance, Delavrancea Park was finished, Domeniilor Park was created, and a large number of luxurious private villas were built in and around Filipescu Park east of Șoseăuă Kiseleff, the big boulevard running along the Herăstrău lake down to Piața Victoriei. An exemption from taxes for ten years was introduced when it came to new buildings, houses, and villas.

Bucharest was no longer a more or less sleepy Eastern European provincial town characterized by strong Oriental elements, as it had been in Marcel Iancu's childhood. Even so, living on Strada Trinității in the absolute center of the city, Iancu would still take offense in 1926 at the multitude of hay carts and horse trams disturbing the traffic flow, at the same time as he strongly criticized the fast and unordered growth which gave tourists the impression of a conglomerate without harmony,

FIGURE 5.1

Strada Lipsclani, Bucharest,  
in 1935. Muzeul Municipiului,  
Bucharest.



style, or soul.<sup>7</sup> Three years earlier the renowned Swedish encyclopaedia *Nordisk Familjebok* had noticed that the city especially since the Trianon treaty had advanced with surprisingly rapid strides,<sup>8</sup> in which immigration and the incorporation of suburban areas and of villages even further outside had played a crucial role, while the city had taken the shape of a world metropolis of Western type with modern streets, open places, and boulevards. Among those public buildings that had been completed just before or just after the war one found the museum of popular art, the academy of architecture, the additions to the university, the Arsenal, and the Palace of the Senate. At that time Bucharest could also boast of having about 70 primary schools—*școli primare*—besides the private schools, nine secondary grammar schools, a great number of “normal” grammar schools, vocational schools, and university colleges—*școli superioare*—as well as girls’ schools, boarding schools, and private foundations. The university, established in 1864, had in 1920 about 8,000 students, thus being one of the largest in Europe.

Whether at the turn of the century or during the decades just after the war, the city of Bucharest could scarcely be described as particularly rationally outlined, since the styles and the influences were mixed in a most haphazard way. The motley character of the city is explained partly by the fact that a great number of Orientally influenced palaces and villas were built by the Turks and later by the Phanariot dynasty; partly by the fact that almost every domestic and foreign architect appointed to build the new capital after the liberation from Ottoman rule had been studying in Paris and therefore favored a French-inspired, preposterously ornamental eclecticism, a style that would dominate Romanian architecture up to the turn of the century alongside the so-called neo-Romanian style, a mixture of Jugendstil, French art nouveau, and elements from Byzantine church architecture. During the nineteenth century the big Parisian boulevards were laid out, inspired by Haussmann, for instance Kiseleff, Ștefan cel Mare, and Mihai Bravu, while the main street Podul Mogoșoaiei was made wider. This winding street, later called Calea Victoriei, crossing the city from north to south, was bordered by several big public buildings such as the Romanian Academy, established in 1879, the royal palace, and Ateneul Român, the academy of music and big concert hall next to the Athénée Palace hotel. The first electric lamps were installed in 1882 in the royal palace while the first telephones were installed one year later between the office of the publishing house Socec and its



printing house on Calea Victoriei. The first electric trams were put in traffic in 1894 between the Cotroceni district and Iancului avenue. The first department stores were built at the turn of the century, of which the best known was Luvru, destroyed by fire in 1911, Magazinul General, and Universal, stores thus supplementing the more than 5,000 small shops and enterprises in the city, and last but not least the so-called Oltenians, exotic itinerant salesmen selling everything from vegetables to fruits, fish and yogurt, live hens, paraffin oil, vinegar, coal, and flour.

Despite the obvious changes and the enormous upswing after the war, the Iancu brothers returned to a city that in many respects still looked like the—from a Western European perspective—somewhat absurd city which they had left, as is shown more or less clearly by contemporary descriptions by foreign visitors. Four years after Marcel Iancu settled down in the “little Paris” of the Balkans, the Briton Mrs. Dudley Heathcote visited Bucharest, staying at the Athénée Palace hotel just opposite the royal palace.<sup>9</sup> Already in the hotel’s lobby she turned up her eyes at the sight of “romantic” gentlemen and ladies with purple lips hugging each other in perfect French. Only Heathcote’s personal *femme de chambre* didn’t fit in all the way since she didn’t know French but spoke German (which she had learned at home in Transylvania) when telling of “die Damen” in Bucharest. How they were enjoying themselves, how they felt ill at home and “did the town” instead, how the wife of a well-known politician the same day had come to the hotel to manicure a Greek diplomat! Heathcote noticed also that the unbelievable multiplicity of horse-drawn cabs played an unmatched role in Bucharest not only as means of transport but also as public boudoirs for both made-up gentlemen and highly scented ladies. The cabs were in constant demand, since they were not only extremely cheap but also let the women be seen in such an excellent way and gave the men endless opportunities to admire the female beauty walking along the city’s pavements.

Poor Paris, exclaims Mrs. Heathcote. The Romanians have taken over your sins and exaggerated them while leaving their virtues in France. Look, for instance, at the generously painted lips of Romanian women below those fluttering eyes that make them look like beautiful beasts of prey, not to speak of all the rouge which both the ladies and the extremely elegant army officers put on their cheeks. According to Heathcote, there is a rule that Calea Victoriei must not be blocked by ox-drawn carts



FIGURE 5.2

National fair, Bucharest, 1906,

with view of Palatul Artelor. Fundația

Culturală Română, Bucharest.

FIGURE 5.3

Calea Victoriei, Bucharest,  
in the 1920s. Academia  
Română, Bucharest.





MAJESTI

VOX

Gramofoane  
VOX  
PLĂCI

Gramofoane  
VOX  
PLĂCI

CAFEA  
DERA  
CACAO

and that the Gypsies must not sit on the sidewalks. The peasants are strictly forbidden to set foot on the Calea as well and are immediately driven away by the police as if they were non-Muslims in a very holy harem. The street itself is extremely elegant, but only two minutes away from Calea Victoriei you must look out to avoid falling into a big hole in the pavement. The river Dâmbovița looks like a broad stinking ditch surrounded by high banks covered with weeds. This is an observation that Heathcote shares with Ethel Greening Pantazzi and Julieta Theodorini in their book *Strolls in Old Corners of Bucharest*, surprisingly enough since the book, published in Bucharest in 1926, was meant to be a tourist guide.<sup>10</sup> Pantazzi and Theodorini remember that long ago, the river, clear and sparkling, flowed through flowery meadows, only to describe the river of their own time as confined by weedy embankments and most unappetizingly dirty; it seems impossible to believe that this is the same river when one rediscovers it in all its pristine beauty not many miles out of town. According to Heathcote, everybody on the other side of the river is free to do whatever, for instance to hang many-colored carpets on the walls facing the street. Indeed, Heathcote is also struck with wonder that still only a few houses and the big hotels have tap water, since the system of water mains was destroyed during the war. Typically Romanian, she exclaims, gaily colored, caviar in abundance, but no water!

Published by the kind permission of the military administration in 1918, a German travel guide tells that Bucharest, unlike, for instance, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, is first of all characterized by the fact that the city doesn't have a real center,<sup>11</sup> although the most part of it is concentrated at the corner of Calea Victoriei and Bulevardul Elisabeta, exactly where the headquarters of the main guard, built in 1916, makes its great display of neoclassical pomp letting itself be surrounded by the gaudy flow of people along the streets, among them the narrow Strada Lipscani, the major shopping street, and Strada Carol, both of them opening out in the Calea Victoriei. Unlike other big cities of Europe, Bucharest gives the impression of being unfinished and fragmented. There are impressive, exceptionally magnificent both private and public buildings in almost every block, and between them poor small houses in the most piteous state. For the most part the public buildings are also situated in "wrong," desolate places and remind one more of effective coulisses than of functionally working institutions. The streets are paved with both cracked asphalt and bumpy stones,

the statues and monuments call to mind not particularly proud memories, and the churches are as impressive as the typical little parish church in a German country town. The system of water mains works only in the center and does not reach to the outskirts, where people must turn to open wells whose water cannot be said to satisfy the hygienic demands of a big city and which therefore causes many diseases among the people.

Of the street life, the German guide also notes that the ladies use far more makeup and powder than is common in any other city in the West, but that one doesn't have to draw any wrong conclusions from this because it is a matter of good manners in this thoroughly French city. Another characteristic trait is the many languages heard in the streets: besides Romanian you may listen to both French and Hungarian, Bulgarian, Turkish, and Romany. On the whole the street life is more gaudy than in any other big city: even men in civilian clothes look affected, not to speak of the women. The women's national costume, together with the bronzed Gypsy women, gives a strong impression of the Orient, an impression strengthened by the great number of poor Italian women standing on street corners singing songs full of sadness while playing on concertinas. In addition you bump into those shoe-shiners with their brushes and tins who appear to be world masters at shining shoes and boots, quickly and handily. In the midst of the swarming crowd little half-dressed boys are running with a bunch of newspapers in their arms doing everything possible to cry louder than the traffic, constantly shouting: buy, buy *Gazeta Bucureștilor*, buy *Lumina*, buy *Scena*, *Agrarul!* Not very far away, their voices are drowned out by the salesmen selling fruits and vegetables carrying big baskets on their shoulders. A policeman is standing in the intersection doing everything possible to get the chaotic traffic straight.

One more unique phenomenon of Bucharest is the popular "Kino Varieties" on, for instance, Bulevardul Elisabeta and Strada Doamnei and in the suburban areas, supplementing the "real" cabarets Alhambra on Strada Sărindar, Majestic-Femina on the Calea Victoriei (to which only army officers have admittance), and Apollo on Strada Câmpineanu. Besides showing tragic-sensational movies, these theaters offer the public extremely funny performances by popular humorists dressed in satirical costumes making fun of everything and everybody, especially the political establishment and the members of the upper classes. The summer theaters, such as Teatrul

Amicii Orbilor, are dominated by revues excessively mixing everything from dance performances to humorous jokes and more or less obscene comic songs.

The German guide cannot forbear either to take the tourists to the Jewish quarter beneath the big metropolitan cathedral concentrated on the artery Strada Văcărescu, the street that looks like an Oriental bazaar full of people selling and buying everything between heaven and earth, everything from small buttons and pieces of sugar to inconceivably expensive furs and, of course, authentic Renaissance works of art. The Spanish Jews, making a congregation of their own, keep their distance from the others. Not far from the Jewish quarter we find the Gypsy quarter characterized by the many fiddlers in the coffeehouses as well as by the jobbing blacksmiths, the bricklayers, and the cobblers.

In the same year as the Janco brothers stood on the stage of Cabaret Voltaire for the first time, their hometown was visited by the Turkish traveler Schehabeddin Bev, who, like so many others, was obviously fascinated by the charm and special beauty of the city.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he paid special attention to Romanian sin. According to him, Bucharest is even more beautiful than Vienna, because everything looks so new and fresh. The surrounding woods, the gardens, and the trees along the boulevards are green and healthy; the neat, graceful, and merry houses and villas, as happy as if the stones were laughing, are almost totally hidden in the midst of the exuberant greenery. Even the official buildings, the Central Bank, the Parliament, the Ministry of Justice, and the main post office, call to mind the fairy-tale castles of childhood. However, according to this traveler it is difficult not to remember that Bucharest is a sinful city: every glance from a man is the same as asking for a dance and an invitation to sinful actions, every laugh from a woman means “yes, please.” Even the twisting and turning streets are affected. Everywhere you feel the scent of perfume and makeup—here a festival devoted to Venus is being celebrated constantly. People walk like flowers as if dreaming they were in love. They rush constantly from one amusement to another, always ready to sacrifice their job for pleasure and gaiety. If people in Sofia, for instance, amuse themselves while working, in Bucharest they follow the opposite principle: “First enjoy yourself, then work, if you have to.” In Bulgaria people go out into the fields, in Romania they go to the tavern. According to Schehabeddin Bev, it is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to find any native Romanians in working life: the

industry is in the hands of the Germans and the Hungarians, business is in the hands of the Greeks, the inns and the restaurants are run by the Albanians, the fields are cultivated by the Bulgarians, while the Jews are responsible for the finances. The only place where you meet Romanians is at the restaurant or the theater or in some government office, and in that case only between eleven and one and between five and seven, if at all.

The most literary and at the same time the most politically critical description of Romania and Bucharest during the first decades of the century was published in 1915 in the American journal *Metropolitan Magazine*, and in a slightly revised version in the book *The War in Eastern Europe* one year later. The journal had sent the war correspondent and writer John Reed to Eastern Europe to cover the current war and hoped, of course, to get eyewitness accounts as exciting and thrilling as those that had made Reed world-famous when he covered the Mexican revolution and rode with the legendary Pancho Villa.<sup>13</sup> However, strong censorship and the conditions of war on the eastern front in Europe did not permit him to engage in the same sort of heroic adventures. Frustrated with the situation, he expressed his disappointment in letters to his friend and former professor, Charles Copeland, telling him that he constantly had to return to Romania and the “Paris of the Balkans” because of the circumstances of mailing convenience and neutrality, though he detested the country and the people. Imagine, the chastened hero wrote, longing for gunpowder and grenades, imagine a small Paris in every respect—cafés, kiosks, pissoirs, an academy producing a dictionary, futurist painters, poets who are pederasts, politicians who are known by the mistresses they keep, craven newspapers, bawdy weeklies.

Like Dudley Heathcote ten years later, John Reed stayed at the Athénée Palace, the most luxurious hotel in the city, which he describes as a “dazzling neo-French façade” facing a little park smothered in an almost tropical luxuriance of trees and flowers, where busts of minor Romanian celebrities on marble columns each stonily ignore the marble wreath proffered by the languishing Muse kneeling on the pedestal. You have seen millions like them all over France, Reed adds. To the left lies the Ateneul, combining the functions of the Louvre, the Panthéon, and the Trocadéro, and built to suggest the architecture of the Opéra. Eastward as far as one can see, red-tile roofs and white-stone copings pile up, broken with vivid masses of





**FIGURE 5.4**

In Bucharest in the 1910s.

Fundația Culturală Română,

Bucharest.

trees—palaces and mansions and hotels of the most florid modern French style, with an occasional Oriental dome or the bulb of a Romanian Greek church.

On the right, Reed tells us, the principal and smartest street, Calea Victoriei, winds roaring between the High Life Hotel and the Jockey Club building, which might have been transplanted bodily from the Boulevard Haussmann. All the world is driving home from the race down on the Chaussée—a combination of the Bois de Boulogne and the Champs-Élysées—where this world has seen the stable of Mr. Alexandru Marghiloman, chief of the Germanophile branch of the Conservative Party, win the Derby as usual. The regular evening parade may begin. An endless file of handsome carriages, drawn by superb pairs of horses, trots smartly by in both directions along the twisting, narrow street, the coachmen wearing blue velvet robes to their feet, belted with bright satin ribbons whose ends flutter out behind, so you can guide them right or left by pulling the proper tab. Each carriage is the setting for a woman or two, rouged, enameled, and dressed more fantastically than the wildest poster girl imagined by French decorators. Overflowing from the sidewalks into the street, a dense crowd moves slowly from the Ateneul, passing the royal palace to the boulevards and back again—extravagant women and youths made up like French decadent poets and army officers in uniforms of pastel shades, with much gold lace, tassels on their boots, and caps of baby-blue and salmon-pink color combinations that would make a comic-opera manager sick with envy. These officers have puffy cheeks and rings under their eyes, and their cheeks are sometimes even painted, and they spend all their time riding up and down the Calea with their mistresses, or eating cream puffs at Capșa's pastry shop, where all prominent and would-be-prominent Bucharestians show themselves every day, and where the vital affairs of the country are settled. What a contrast between the officers and rank and file of the army and the strong, stocky little peasants who swing by in squads, excellently equipped and trained!

Reed tells also of the numerous coffeehouses and confectioners spilling their tables out onto the sidewalks and the streets, crowded with debauched-looking men and women. In the open café gardens the Gypsy orchestras swing into wild rhythms that get to be a habit like strong drinks; a hundred restaurants fill with exotic crowds. The shop windows gleam with jewels and costly things that men buy for their mistresses. Ten thousand public women parade; true Bucharestians boast

that their city supports more prostitutes proportionately than any other four big cities in the world combined.

You would imagine, Reed says, that Bucharest was as ancient as Sofia or Belgrade. The white stone weathers so quickly under the hot, dry sun, the oily rich soil bears such a mellowing abundance of vegetation, life is so complex and sophisticated, yet thirty years ago there was nothing here but a wretched village, some old churches, and an older monastery which was the seat of a princely family: Bucharest is a get-rich city, like the modern Romanian civilization, a mushroom growth of thirty years. The fat plain is one of the greatest grain-growing regions in the world, and there are mountains covered with fine timber, but the mainspring of wealth is the oil region. There are oil kings and timber kings and land kings, quickly and fabulously wealthy. It costs more to live in Bucharest than in New York, Reed assures.

According to John Reed, there is nothing original about the city either, nothing individual or authentic. Everything is borrowed. A dinky little German king lives in a dinky little palace that looks like a French prefecture, surrounded by a pompous little court. Although all titles of nobility except in the king's immediate family were abolished years ago, many people call themselves "Prince" and "Count" because their forefathers were Moldavian and Wallachian boyars; not to speak of the families who trace their descent from the emperors of Byzantium. Poets and artists and musicians and doctors and lawyers and politicians have all studied in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, or Munich. In Bucharest cubism is more cubic and futurism more futuristic than anywhere else, Reed says. Frenchified little policemen bully the market-bound peasants, who dare to drive across the Calea Victoriei and interrupt the procession of kept women. The cabarets and the music halls are like less amusing places on Montmartre; you can see revues based on dull French ones, copies of risqué comedies straight from the Théâtre Antoine, or the National Theater, which imitates the Comédie Française and looks like the Municipal Theater at Lyons. A surface coating of French frivolity covers everything, without meaning and without charm.

According to Reed, every occasional visitor, like the Romanians themselves, is constantly reminded of the Romanians' Latin origin; the newspapers insist every day that the Romanians are Latin—every day there is a reference to "our brothers, the French, or the Spaniards, or the Italians"—but really of purer blood than these

“brothers,” since the Romanians are descendants of Roman veterans sent to colonize Transylvania by the Emperor Trajan. In a square in Bucharest—in front of the Biserice Sf. Gheorghe Nou—there is a fountain showing Romulus and Remus being suckled by the wolf, and some of the public buildings are adorned with the insignia, the fasces, the eagle, and “S.P.Q.R.” It is certainly true that the language is derived from Latin, but this language is strongly impregnated with Slavic and Asiatic loans and therefore inflexible to use, and harsh and unmusical to the ear. Undeniably the Romanians have Latin traits: excitability, candor, wit, and talent for hysterical arguments in critical situations. The Romanian is, according to Reed, lazy and proud, like a Spaniard, but without the Spanish flavor; he is skeptical and libertine, like a Frenchman, but without the French taste; he is melodramatic and emotional, like an Italian, but without Italian charm. Furthermore, shopkeepers and cabmen and waiters in restaurants are thieving and ungracious, and if they can’t cheat you, they fly into an ugly rage and scream like angry monkeys. How many times have Romanian friends said to Reed: “Don’t go to so-and-so’s shop; he is a Romanian and will cheat you. Find a German or a French place.”

John Reed is not particularly gracious when it comes to the rest of the country either. It is certainly true that there are sometimes peasants on the streets of the capital, but they are not “true” peasants, the men in white linen trousers and shirts that fall to their knees, embroidered in delicate designs of flowers, the women in richly decorated linen skirts and blouses of drawn work exquisitely worked in color, chains of gold coins hanging around their necks. They fit into the comic-opera scheme of things. But one hour by automobile from Bucharest, you come upon a village where the people live in burrows in the ground, covered with roofs of dirt and straw. The ground in which the burrows are dug is owned by a boyar, who keeps a racing stable in France. The peasants eat nothing but corn, not because they are vegetarians, Reed assures us, but because they are too poor to eat meat. And the church provides for frequent fasts, which are the subject of laudatory comments on “frugality and thrift” by satisfied landowners. The peasants are very religious too, or superstitious. For instance, they believe that if a man dies without a lighted candle in his hand to guide him through the dark corridor of death, he will not reach heaven. Now many people *do* die suddenly without the lighted candle, and here is where the church comes in. The country priest charges the dead man’s family eighty francs

to get him into heaven without the candle, and a certain sum yearly to keep him there. The priest also takes advantage of the old vampire legend: if a peasant dies and others from his family or village follow in quick succession, the priest suggests that the dead man's spirit is a vampire. To lay this ghost, the body must be exhumed in the dead of night and the heart torn out by an ordained priest, who drives a wooden peg through it. For this he charges a hundred francs.

Never was a country so ripe for revolution, Reed exclaims, and points to the fact that more than fifty percent of the arable land is owned by fewer than ten percent of the country's landowners—some four and a half thousand big proprietors out of a population of seven and a half million, seven-eighths of whom are working peasants. The landowners themselves seldom live on their estates. Indeed, it is all they can do to keep up their hotels in Paris and Vienna, their houses in Bucharest, their villas at Nice, Constanța, and Sinaia, their winters on the Riviera, art galleries, racing stables, and general blowing of money in the four quarters of the world. Furthermore, there is no public opinion in Romania, where, as in other parts of the Balkans, politics is largely a personal matter; newspapers are the organs of individual men who have jockeyed themselves to be party leaders, in a country where a new party is born every hour over a glass of beer in the nearest café. For instance, *La Politique* is the organ of the millionaire Marghiloman, once so pro-French that it is said he used to send his laundry to Paris. Then there is the *Indépendance roumaine*, property of the family of Mr. Brătianu, the premier, who was pro-German at the beginning of the war, but who became mildly pro-Ally. The Conservative Democrats' Take Ionescu has his own mouthpiece, *La Roumaine*.

John Reed mentions Casa Capșa on Calea Victoriei but might have referred to many other more or less messy coffeehouses and restaurants as well,<sup>14</sup> all of them patronized alike by the intellectual elite, the “rebels,” and the Frenchified bohemians of the growing avant-garde circles in Bucharest. One of the best-known cafés—the Kübler—was situated in Hotel Imperial at the corner of Strada Știrbei Vodă and Calea Victoriei facing the royal palace; among the guests one could catch a glimpse of both the symbolists and the “modernists,” for instance the poets Alexandru Macedonski, Ion Minulescu, Ion Barbu, Tudor Arghezi, and Eugen Iovanaki, who already in *Simbolul* made himself known under the name of Ion Vinea. Apparently, like Arghezi, Minulescu, and

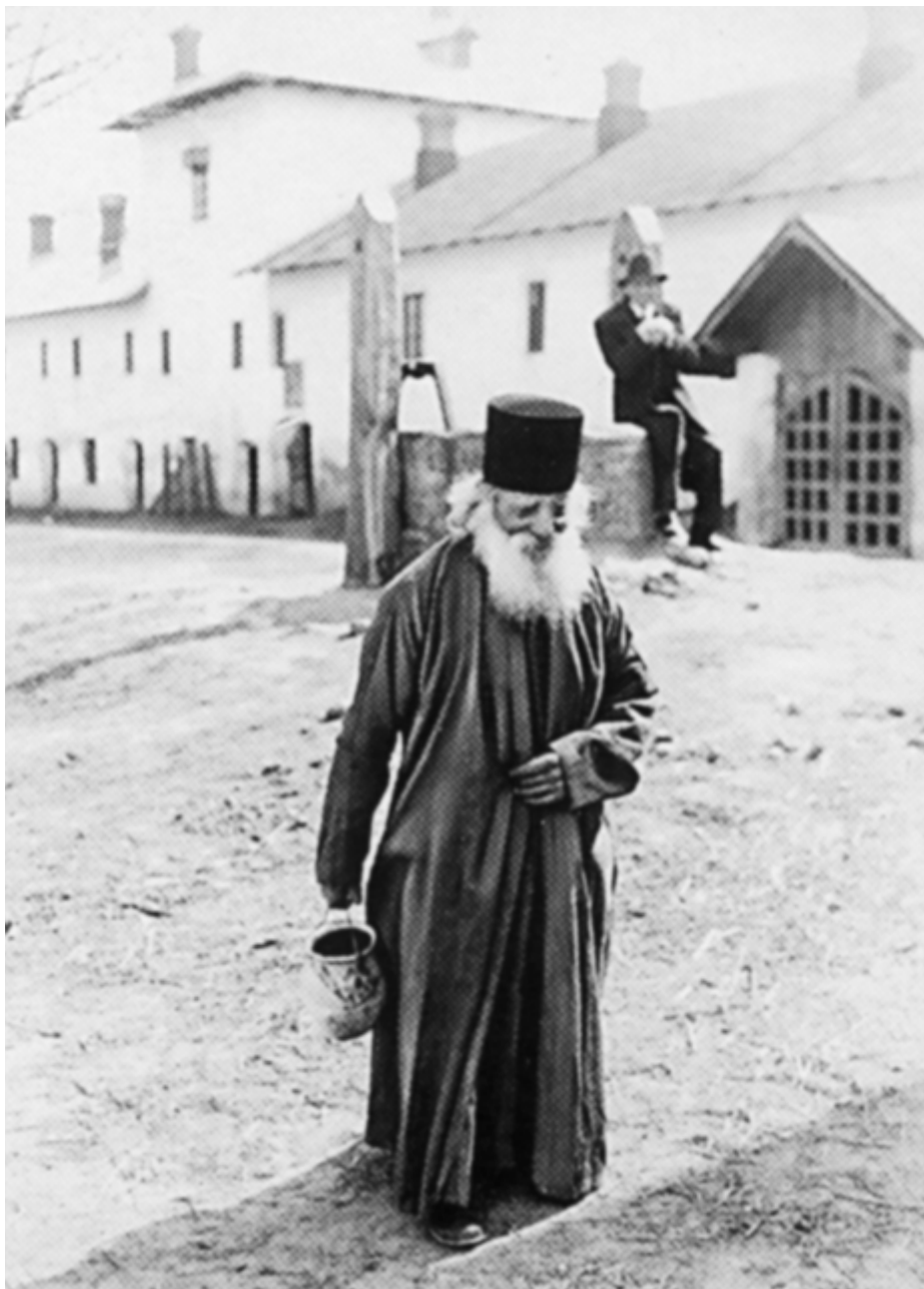


FIGURE 5.5

Monk in a Romanian  
village, c. 1920.

Photo: Iosif Berman.

Muzeul Țăranului

Român, Bucharest.

Barbu, Vinea was also one of the regular customers of Terasa Oteleseanu on Strada Mihai Stere, where the pro-French bohemians formed “Academia de la Terasa” and discussed the new aesthetics with the other rebels, among them the artists Iosif Iser and Camil Ressu together with the “absurdist” Ion Luca Caragiale. Like the Kübler, the café High Life, also mentioned by Reed, was situated on Calea Victoriei, in the Hotel Metropol, where Vinea hobnobbed with Macedonski, though the café was mostly known as the “press club” of Bucharest. Café de la Paix was another popular place situated on the Calea, like Café Riegler and Bodega Palatului, while Café Lux was situated on Strada Academiei, and Café Boulevard, Café Princiar, and Café Astoria on Bulevardul Elisabeta, the boulevard crossing Calea Victoriei.

Undoubtedly the best-known of all the coffeehouses of Bucharest, Casa Capşa,<sup>15</sup> also opened its doors onto Calea Victoriei, one block before the crowded street crosses Bulevardul Elisabeta further south. This café and luxurious pastry shop was founded as far back as 1852 by Vasile and Anton Capşa. Its first era of prosperity occurred only a few decades later under the legendary Grigore Capşa, who had studied at Boissier in Paris and who later was appointed provisioner to the princely court thanks to the fact that Prince Carol, members of the princely family, and high civil servants of the court were among the regular customers, highly pleased by the French pastries and fancy cakes; the first confectioners were all French. By the 1880s Grigore Capşa went one step further, opening a hotel in the same building as the café where both foreign diplomats and members of the parliament and the senate came to stay, like many foreign cultural and royal personalities, among them, for instance, Prince Milan IV of Serbia, who appointed Capşa provisioner to the Serbian princely court, and the Russian Tsar Alexander III.

In 1890 Capşa installed the first private telephone in Bucharest at the same time as he introduced another novelty, the “terasa” or open-air restaurant on the sidewalk of Calea Victoriei with a wide rooflet of striped linen, small round tables, and light chairs of Malacca cane. It is said that ladies “with style” avoided walking on the same side of the Calea so as not to find themselves on the knees of the male customers. Inside, three private salons were furnished for discreet meetings, one of the rooms being reserved for women only, all novelties in Bucharest. By the turn of the century the new part of the café was already the meeting place par excellence of noisy journalists, politicians, writers, and artists, while the old part further inside

was frequented by the royal family and other members of the aristocracy as well as by dignitaries of the upper classes, who were more than pleased to have lunch at Casa Capșa, read the newspapers, scold the stupid politicians, flirt with the ladies. Capșa became known also as a kind of branch office of the parliament, at the same time as many editorial offices were located to the café; it is told that several of the best-known artists dragged their easels to the café and transformed it into a kind of collective studio. Among the “pillars of Capșa” we find the politician Radu Văcărescu, Popa Miculescu, the painter Alexandru Ghica, Costache Bălcescu, former minister of the Cuza government, Grigore Ventura, editor of the *Indépendance roumaine*, I. G. Valentinianu, director of the newspaper *Reform*, and Victor Ionescu, owner of the newspaper *Action*. At Capșa, particularly in the private rooms, the feelings ran high when politicians of different political orientations gathered together either to appoint a new government or to dismiss the old one, which seemed to happen almost every day in the constantly squabbling nation.

In this world, in this country, and in this city the Romanian dadaists were born and grew up, and Bucharest was the city to which they would constantly return, in one way or another. The Iancu brothers came back to settle down in Bucharest, where Marcel Iancu in particular soon became the spider in the web of that city’s exceptionally animated avant-garde. Arthur Segal participated in practically every important exhibition held in Bucharest up to the moment when the political situation silenced the modernist movements at the beginning of the 1940s, at the same time as he introduced the Romanian painters Max Herman Maxy and Hans (or János) Mattis-Teutsch to German avant-garde circles in Berlin.<sup>16</sup> Tristan Tzara contributed actively to the Romanian avant-garde as well by publishing poems and other texts in several of its major journals and magazines, and by letting the undisputed spokesman of Romanian surrealism, Sașa Pană, collect and publish several of his early poems in the collection *Primele poeme* in 1934.<sup>17</sup> At the same time Tzara was in somewhat regular contact by letter with his parents and his sister Lucie-Marie in Bucharest at least up till December 1959.<sup>18</sup> In the letters he often complains about his bad financial situation and his many obligations that prevent him from visiting the family in Bucharest. However, he may have had the chance to meet them when visiting Bucharest in 1923 and in November 1947,<sup>19</sup> the only times he returned after leaving the city in 1915.



Characteristic of the situation is the fact that the reason for the visit in 1947 was professional rather than private, since he had been invited by Sașa Pană to take part in the surrealist conference that would indicate the last tremor of the Romanian avant-garde before the communists forced King Michael I to abdicate in December and proclaimed the new People's Republic of Romania. An entire culture was buried and would never return. Bucharest would never again be the same—a city of international importance in arts and letters.

Samuel Rosenstock

**BECOMES**

Tristan Tzara



As John Reed is standing on the balcony of the Athénée Palace looking at the sights of the city, something happens in Bucharest that none of those involved could have anticipated, and which would have decisive consequences for the plans of a former German playwright and a former prostitute and music hall artist several hundred miles away. At the same time as Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, sitting at the Café Odéon in Zurich, are making plans for their rebellious literary cabaret, and probably at the same time as Marcel Janco is preparing himself for his architectural studies at the ETH while his brother Jules is sitting in his room at Pension Altinger reading for the university examinations later that autumn, a family scandal occurs in Bucharest that pushes Samuel Rosenstock, nineteen years old, to leave the Romanian capital and escape abroad, more or less head over heels. Eight years later Tzara himself called the scandal “a painful story of insults, horror, and terror, curses, anger, and rage, anguish and hatred” which led to his father’s disassociation from his son only moments before the latter’s departure for Zurich.<sup>1</sup> His son was virtually dead in the eyes of the father and had to carry a “bitter life” in his luggage when entering the train at Gara de Nord; apparently they were never fully reconciled.

What happened? What did the scandal look like? What scandal? Tristan Tzara himself admits that he had caused the scandal himself, that it coincided with the sudden departure from Bucharest, and that it badly affected persons remotely related to the family. It is certainly true that he took the blame himself, but he cannot avoid referring to the “hurt social conventions” that had caused “lacerated muscles, torn clothes sprinkled with parental scents, inabilities and aversions, dubious blood and compromises.” According to Tzara, remembering his “sacrifice” and the horrid attitude he had showed, people around him quickly changed their opinion about his meek and sensitive character when one beautiful afternoon “under ridiculous circumstances” they discovered that he had “deflowered” a fifteen-year-old girl in the room of his own grandmother, whose door was guarded by one of his mistresses who, furthermore, acted as procuress. As a kind of excuse he tells also that he liked neither the lust and cruelty he had shown, despite the girl’s unaffected sobs, nor her “overemphasized” resignation. The true value of the episode he discovered only when, that same night, he was sitting on the train escaping those “animal” persecutions that tortured his delicate feelings, making him think only about the mischievous, calculating, and covetous proficiencies which he hadn’t discovered until now.

However, nothing is ever so simple as it appears. Although the immediate reason for the sudden departure from Bucharest was the family scandal, painful enough, we have every reason to consider at least the possibility of the scandal being unconsciously provoked to force a decision which the nineteen-year-old was unable to make by himself, perhaps even in direct confrontation with the parental authority, and which at the same time may be connected to the fact that the boy selected Zurich and not any other Central European city. The immediate reason for this choice was certainly neither the fact that Switzerland was neutral in the war nor that the cosmopolitan young man was particularly attracted by the multilingual city filled with intellectuals from all over Europe, which have been suggested,<sup>2</sup> but rather the fact that both Marcel and Jules Janco were already living in the city, a suggestion confirmed by the autobiographical statement that Tristan Tzara was met by Marcel Janco at the Hauptbahnhof,<sup>3</sup> who convinced him to stay in spite of his own plans of continuing, and by the fact that, as mentioned before, he immediately put in at the same boardinghouse as the Janco brothers.

This must have been the crucial point regarding the escape to Switzerland: the most important thing for young Tzara was to remedy the feeling of being bored, a feeling apparently conditioned by psychological factors and scarcely mitigated by the fact that the Janco brothers had left Bucharest. Apparently the feeling was acute despite the fact that he was already engaged in the next big project after *Simbolul*, that is, Ion Vinea's journal *Chemarea*, far more radical than *Simbolul*. Tzara himself declared in a letter to Jacques Rivière in December 1917,<sup>4</sup> as in the autobiographical remarks of 1923,<sup>5</sup> that he would have become a great adventurer with sophisticated gestures, if only he had had the physical strength and the psychological persistence to achieve an exceptional heroic deed: not to be bored. How often hadn't he reproached himself with the fact that he was only a tradesman in words who turned ideas and elements from life upside down, transforming them into images and crystallized sentences? Tzara implies also that he didn't think there were enough interesting people to write about or to meet with in Bucharest. One solution seemed to be to resign himself and do nothing. According to himself, his "merely improvised writings" were for a long time nothing but materialized weariness and disgust, mostly at himself, a feeling that he tried to disturb by writing poetry. Tzara says also that he had always dreamed of losing his own personality; he was simply dreaming of becoming impersonal and

of renouncing the arrogance of the belief in himself being the center of the world. He consciously developed his own “impurity” and his own vices, being at the same time a “rigorous opportunist.” The conclusion was very simple: the active indifference was the only way to get out of the feeling of being bored.

However, Tristan Tzara also longed for adventure and fame. His ruthlessness regarding his own career is attested by many, and already the fact that the Iancu brothers were “right in the middle of everything” in Zurich must have strengthened his feelings of indifference and of being an outsider not able to achieve his ambitious goals. Although the immediate reason for the sudden departure for Zurich may have been the family scandal in combination with the attraction which the Iancus’ staying in the international city must have had, this doesn’t exclude the reason which, for instance, the Romanian scholar Marin Sorescu suggests in a lecture at the Romanian Academy in 1996<sup>6</sup> and which Samuel Rosenstock’s own pseudonym seems to confirm, namely that the precocious nineteen-year-old simply and despite everything was bored in Bucharest or in the family’s summer house in Gârceni in the Moldavian Vaslui region, where his grandfather had an estate,<sup>7</sup> and that the sudden rupture therefore was hardly too disappointing though it may have been enforced by the parents. According to Sorescu, the first poems that Samuel Rosenstock wrote in Romanian look like himself in a wonderful way: the youth being bored living in the country. In *Simbolul* Samuel Rosenstock had used the pseudonym S. Samyro, but a year later he tried at least two alternative pseudonyms.<sup>8</sup> The first part of the final pseudonym appears for the first time in a sketchbook in 1913 linked to a draft of a poem telling about Hamlet.<sup>9</sup> On the same page as the poem the young writer has drawn four Hamlet heads with pointed beard and one head of Ophelia, signing the poem and the drawings with “Tristan Ruia,” an indirect homage to symbolism by allusion to the symbolist poet Tristan Corbière.<sup>10</sup> Two years later Samuel Rosenstock had already transformed himself, at first into Tristan Țara and then into Tristan Tzara, in both *Chemarea* and the similarly short-lived journal *Nouă revista română*. Tristan Tzara, a name legalized in 1925 by a decision of the Romanian ministry of the interior, is also directly connected to the Romanian language in which he wrote his first poems. Since the Romanian word Țara, pronounced “tsara” or “tzara,” means “country,” while the word trist means “melancholic” or “sad,” the pseudonym has been interpreted as *trist en țara*, “sad in his own country,”<sup>11</sup> which most probably is a literary rewriting of the

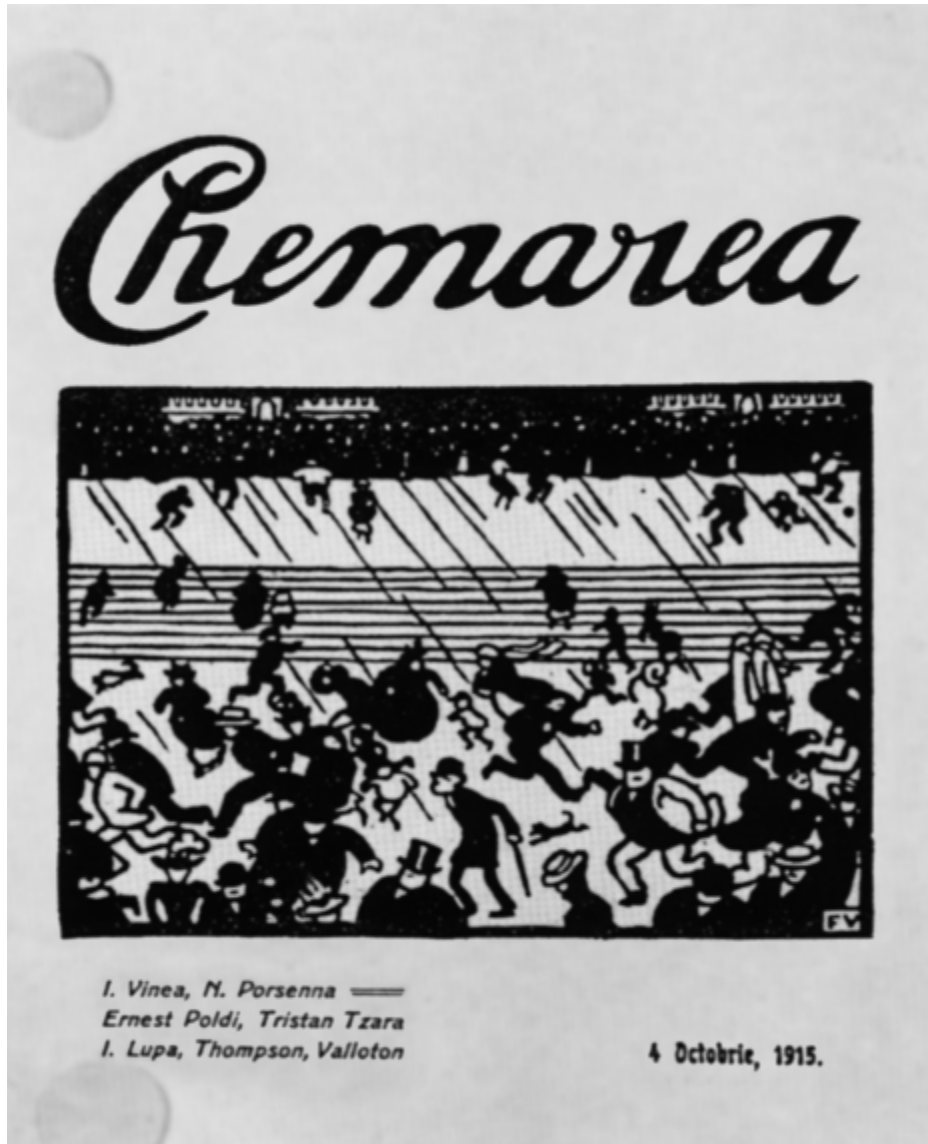


FIGURE 6.1

*Chemarea*, 4 October 1915.

dominating feeling of being bored in Romania. At the same time the pseudonym may express an ill-concealed criticism of the established literary currents and, on the whole, of the cultural atmosphere in Bucharest, which *Chemarea* did everything possible to fight against.

When he boarded the train in Bucharest, Tristan Tzara was not only unusually well prepared but also extremely motivated. According to the Romanian scholar Ion Pop,<sup>12</sup> the emergence of a Romanian avant-garde is usually discussed in rather simplistic terms, while the phenomenon is always linked to the relatively short development of Romanian literary traditions in general. The most common opinion is that a modernist movement in Romania could not have succeeded because it would have been quickly suppressed by the antirevolutionary state apparatus; nor could it possibly have had a meaning, as Romanian literature was still young around 1915 and had no obsolete, stagnant forms to destroy. Linked to this is also the notion that on the eve of the dadaist “Zurich insurrection,” the Romanian avant-garde could not possibly have had any consequences on a European scale, while the very birth of an avant-garde within a still young literature in search of modern solutions seems highly improbable. The common mistake at this stage of the analysis, according to Pop, is to consider Romanian literature in a strange isolation from European literature, as if the experiences of other literatures could only bear results within the respective countries. Though not much older than a century, Romanian poetry had clearly evinced its capacity to make up for lost time and even to achieve art forms that were obviously more than mere echoes of outside developments. As to the avant-garde, if we admit, Ion Pop says, that certain trends copied foreign examples, it is also true that in Romania there was a pre-avant-garde climate in the early twentieth century that was, to a certain extent, made possible by late symbolism. A certain exclusivism of cliché-generating traditional trends—samanatorism and poporanism in particular—also contributed to the appearance of an avant-garde reaction. Lastly, the background of a crisis-threatened Europe contributed its stimulating influences as well.

According to Ion Pop, we must, in other words, not forget that until the year preceding his emergence as a dadaist in Switzerland, Tristan Tzara had developed in a Romanian literary atmosphere that was favorable to the most daring experiments and inventions. For instance, the poet Adrian Maniu, who contributed to *Simbolul* in



**FIGURE 6.2**

Samuel Rosenstock (at right)  
together with his grandfather  
Ilie and his father Filip Rosenstock  
in Gărceni in the 1910s.  
Mira Rinzler, Naples, Florida.



1912, had already started on a career that went beyond symbolism and foreshadowed an unorthodox lyricism with occasional antiliterary tendencies, lyrical dissonances, and absurdities inspired by both Jules Laforgue and Oscar Wilde.<sup>13</sup> The wax figures in the collection of poems *Figuri de ceara*, published in the same year as its writer engaged himself in *Simbolul*, still appeared in a macabre Baudelairian environment, but soon Maniu's "paper flowers," as he himself called his ingeniously decorated plaitings of words, were accompanied by daring associations of images and grotesque, sentimental, and parodic effusions which most of his contemporaries labeled as tasteless.

In his own poems in *Simbolul*, Samuel Rosenstock, however, had quite a distance still to walk before he was ready to turn his back to symbolism, as is clear, for instance, from the poem *Dans de fée*, published in the fourth issue of the journal, whose French title already indicates that the young writer was inspired by the same sources as Maniu and the other Romanian symbolists.

In 1915, the year Tudor Arghezi—pseudonym of the former factory worker, monk, lay worker, and watchmaker Ion Theodorescu—began his journal *Cronica*, in which he published a purposefully prosaic poetry parodying traditional formulas and in which he stated that he found literature "definitely antipathetic," and which caused heated discussions at Casa Capșa and other artist-favored restaurants, Tristan Tzara's close friend Ion Vinea (inspired by Arghezi's iconoclastic spirit, according to Pop)<sup>14</sup> published his short-lived but all the more important journal *Chemarea*, in whose inaugural issue of 4 October 1915 appeared the "warning" that may be characterized as the first manifesto ever of the Romanian avant-garde following the familiar modernist pattern.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to *Simbolul*, *Chemarea* is more aggressive and at the same time more political, as is evident from the exorbitant tone of voice of Vinea's "manifesto" when he exhorts those like-minded to "go out with heavy armor under our vests," with weapons at hand together with sharpened pencils and bombs in the wastebaskets. He invites the readers to "a wide and thoughtful discussion"; the new journal, Vinea proclaims, is open to everybody, writers, journalists, students, but not to those who turn their backs on reality, the pederasts of politics. Rigorous explanations, he says, do not demonstrate the usefulness of having one additional megaphone today. According to him, it is useless to define one's own attitude and to build it on the scaffolding of arguments, more or less symmetrical and evident, more or less new, especially



**FIGURE 6.3**

The circle of *Chemarea* in 1915:

from left to right, Tristan Tzara, Max

Herman Maxy, Ion Vinea, Jacques

Costin, and unknown. Muzeul

Literaturii Române, Bucharest.

SAMUEL ROSENSTOCK BECOMES TRISTAN TZARA

when the quasi-unanimity of the possessors of the stolen national treasures is ready to judge only in favor of themselves. If the journal were to do this, it would immediately be “hypocritically assimilated to a gramophone” recording nasal sounds of others. No,

*we know the amorphous and rough mass of readers, the honest and unconscious victims, regularly welcomed at the crossroads by the chap with the eyes dilated by inanition, with the mysterious and starving voice: “Do you see the ring?” (which he hermetically keeps in his hand). “This is your dream of sterling gold and the philosopher’s stone. I have found it and I hold it. I give it to you only for this . . .” and the victim buys it. Disdainfully he passes the old and safe shop windows. He goes home to shed a few drops of urine on his wife’s neck. The sheets, bought by chance, become a family jewel, hereditary as a crown.*<sup>16</sup>

Well, Vinea asks, what is more dangerous and useless than to show this person the falseness of his gems? The more so as you know that you are living in a medieval walled city, where order and safety don’t exist, a city where the fingers try to continue to play on the guitar near the castle, under the balcony, though the player has been hit by a stone or a bludgeon; this is the sensational appearance of the black capes, the black masks under velvet plumes. Thus, “let us go out with heavy armor under our vests. Let us replace the maps from the editorial offices with arms in hand; let us place bombs in the wastebaskets, let us wield pencil sword canes.”<sup>17</sup>

Bearing in mind his Jewish birth, which must have been most problematic in the anti-Semitic and strongly ethno-nationalist Romanian society, it may be surprising that Tristan Tzara contributed to a journal which—in its second issue on 11 October—let the pseudonymous N. Porsenna develop his idea of the necessity of history and explain that suffering is a creative force,<sup>18</sup> at the same time as an old friend from *Simbolul*, Theodor Solacolu, accused the politicians of selling out true patriotism and of transforming the national ideal into an ever-shifting kaleidoscope instead of basing it on the belief and the feeling that everybody shares with everybody else, i.e., the indivisible dream of an ethnically unified nation.<sup>19</sup> Even Ion Vinea, responsible for the journal, indicates more or less clearly, though ironically and banteringly, that it would be best to invade Transylvania and Bessarabia in spite of the fact that the trenches would be filled with Romanian corpses.<sup>20</sup>

In regard to the heated feelings just before Romania decided to enter the war after having “successfully” participated in the Balkan War, Tristan Tzara’s poem “Furtuna și cîntecul dezertorului” must be interpreted as a kind of exceptionally brave homage to the deserters. The poem—of which the first part was published in the second issue of *Chemarea*, while the second part was published in *Primele poeme* almost twenty years later—expresses a kind of self-identification with those who refused to enroll in the ultranationalistic chorus doing everything possible to justify Romania’s “historically righteous” involvement in the war:

*Light burst from shells  
And lightning cracked in our hands  
Just as God’s hand split into five fingers  
We come up on the troops from behind and cut them down  
We trample corpses left in the snow  
We open a window to the drowned darkness  
Through valleys that sucked the enemy dry  
They have killed them to the distant blue.*

*Frost: bones splinter, flesh crumbles  
We let our hearts weep.*

*Why do we slither along the cleft mountain?  
The bellowing storm loosed its lions  
In the riven wood  
The dark wind does not reach the heart’s core  
And we wait for the rarefied cimbalom  
Holy singing clear and simple  
Over leprous hills in the gorge  
Like the skull’s eyesocket  
We sheltered our dread of the storm  
And someone began to blab  
Down there.*

*I collected his words—as many as  
Pierced me as werewolves pierce lunar serenities—  
To make you pearls with sharks' teeth  
That stir whirlwinds of ugly dreams.  
The eye eaten with rust aims fire  
We enter the muzzle of distance  
And beneath the chain of fort teeth  
The others wait.*

*It's so dark only the words are shining.*<sup>21</sup>

The poem, which most probably reflects contemporary reports about the battlefields in Bulgaria and Macedonia,<sup>22</sup> expresses with the help of nonconformist metaphors and unusual combinations of images a strong feeling of both indignation and estrangement at the same time it gets its counterpart in the poem “Cîntec de război” in the same year, a song about all those longing to return home from the misery of the war, all those who are driven, wounded and weary, toward the fronts without even making the sign of the cross when passing a church, all those who “sleep with the sorrow of the woods.” It is a remarkable fact that Tristan Tzara wrote these antiwar poems before Romania entered the war and long before contemporary poets like Apollinaire in France and Wilfred Owen in England expressed similar feelings.<sup>23</sup>

If already the attitude of *Simbolul* may be defined as both revolutionary and partly a result of the protest against traditional “mannerism” which the symbolists had formulated at the turn of the century,<sup>24</sup> it is evident that by 1915 (when he begins to use his new pseudonym Tristan Tzara) Samuel Rosenstock is trying to free himself from postsymbolist prosody and other literary tricks of the trade. An expressive example of this is the poem “Vacanța în provincie,” published in the inaugural issue of *Chemarea*, whose origin may be traced back to his time spent in Gârteni. The poem is designed as a pastoral idyll, with a loving couple taking a walk through a small village in the country:

*In the sky unmoving birds  
Like fly tracks  
Servants talk at stable doors  
Dung blooms on the path.*

*With his little girl the man in black walks by  
Beggars' joy at evening  
I have a Punch with bells at home  
To distract my sadness when you deceive me*

*My soul's a bricklayer coming home from work  
Memory with clean drugstore smell  
Tell me, old servant, about once upon a time*

*And you cousin let me know when the cuckoo sings*

*Let's climb into the ravine—  
God when he yawns—  
Let's mirror ourselves in the lake  
With crow-silk*

*Let's be poor when we return  
And knock on the stranger's door  
With spring-barked bird beak  
Or let's go nowhere  
Mourning in white for the neighbor's girl.<sup>25</sup>*

Several of the poems, often written in quatrains, are like absurd, melancholic short stories about, for instance, the “blond Lia,” the heroine in many of the poems. The poem “Glas,” written in 1914, is more or less characteristic of the young poet's feelings:

*Shattered wall  
Today I asked  
Myself why  
She didn't hang herself*

*Lia, blond Lia  
She would have swung  
From a rope at night  
Like a ripe pear*

*And dogs in the street  
Would have barked  
And people gathered  
To gape*

*And they'd have yelled  
"Take care she doesn't fall."  
I would have nailed  
The lock to the door*

*I'd have set a ladder  
And taken her down  
Like a ripe pear  
Like a dead girl  
And put her in a nice bed.<sup>26</sup>*

The fact that young Samuel Rosenstock interpreted contemporary poetic idioms and lyrical sentiments is also clear from poems written by his friend Eugen Iovanaki under the pseudonym Ion Vinea, for instance the poem "Tuzla," dedicated to Marcel Iancu:

*The moon left silvery pages  
and the water was stirring  
obscure readings.  
We unfurled the boat  
and the sails.  
You remember the fisherman  
he knew the songs of Dobruja  
the sea was listening to him.  
There was such a quiet wind,  
The moon was like someone forgotten in a palace mirror,  
we thought of those who haven't yet touched us.  
On the beach the red tavern was dancing.  
And behind the golden sand banks were sleeping.<sup>27</sup>*

Unlike Vinea's poetry, several of Tzara's early poems are characterized by black humor, dramatic departures from conventional poetic rhetorics, unexpected pauses, syntactic displacements, and even mixed languages. Take, for instance, some extracts from the poem "În gropi fierbe viața rosie" written in 1914:

*TIȚULE  
TIȚULE  
your brother  
is shrieking  
and you tell him  
between pages of the book the hand  
with lime paint my belief  
it burns without candles in the wire wick*

*TIȚULE*

*ton frère crie / tu lui dis /  
entre les feuillets du livre  
humides / la main*



*avec la chaux peins moi  
la croyance*

...

*red life boils in the pits  
for silence he wants me to count joys*

...

*Thursday October  
titzule, I shall make a poem but don't laugh  
4 streets surround us and we call them lights ON POSTS of prayer  
and you talked with the elephants at the circus, like light  
I don't want to be sick any more, you know  
this morning why do you want to whistle telephone  
no I don't want it squeezes me MUCH TOO  
HARD*

...

*but I am serious when I think of what happened to me  
tițule  
tițule  
tițule  
TIȚULE<sup>28</sup>*

Strangely enough, most of the research on Tzara has hitherto marginalized the Romanian background and its significance for his literary development. In compiling the French edition of Tzara's collected works in the 1970s, even the Romanian-born translator and writer Claude Sernet (Mihai Cosma) placed Tzara's first Romanian poems among French symbolism and postsymbolism,<sup>29</sup> nor did the American literary historian Gordon Frederick Browning seem to discern any Romanian influences in young Rosenstock's production, while more or less flatly denying its importance for

the full-fledged dadaist Tristan Tzara.<sup>30</sup> Browning, like Sernet, certainly admits that the metaphorical imagery of the early poems is both fresh and carefully chiseled, occasionally even naive, but he says also that the poems are not especially aggressive or shocking, though the poetic combinations may be unexpected. The poetic ellipses are frequent but not incoherent, he says. The sensibility of the Romanian imagery is aesthetic and keeps just the distance of poetic language that this attitude implies and requires. The choice of motifs is lyrically inspired and refers to traditional pastoral idylls and provincial melancholy, juvenile love fantasies, and country walks. The literary atmosphere is evoked, for instance, by a sick girlfriend, loneliness, and weariness, occasionally disgust, referring directly to literary tradition.

Did the young Romanian know Guillaume Apollinaire's *Alcools*? asks Serge Fauchereau,<sup>31</sup> and rejects the notion of some kind of total break between Tzara's poetry before 1916 and his Dada production. According to Fauchereau, Tzara around 1915 was already a person in full control of his literary means and resources, as is shown, for instance, by the poem "Insomnie," whose opening is characterized by its parody of the Lord's Prayer:

*Squeeze, Lord, the moon's lemon*  
*Let there be heaven's simplicity*  
*Send news of miracles*  
*Like the rag bird of light*  
*For the soul's joy.*<sup>32</sup>

Already the syntax is refractory, and soon Tzara threw off his overcoat to reach a poetic diction beyond which Dada didn't have to go much further in the linguistic dismantling of articulation—merely suppress the words themselves and solely stress their different sound values. It is more or less obvious that Tzara by now was trying to break with the tonal and rhythmic qualities of established Romanian poetry. In a letter to Jacques Doucet in October 1922 he explained that already in 1914 he had tried to remove the words from their meaning in order to give a new "global sense" of the verse by the tonality and the auditory contrast.<sup>33</sup> According to the American literary theorist Michael H. Impey,<sup>34</sup> this "perverse alchemy of words" is perhaps most evident in Tzara's already quoted poem "În gropi fierbe viața rosie," the Romanian version of

which comprises thirteen of the nineteen parts of “Réalités cosmiques vanille tabac éveils,” a poem published in 1923 in the *De nos oiseaux* cycle. Here for the first time, says Impey, we have a fully developed poem that fits comfortably into Tzara’s most mature Dada series: the spontaneous association of images, the disassociation of word meaning, the absence of punctuation, the use of capitals to indicate emotional tension, and the meandering of key words across the page, as well as the complete abandonment of a formal metrical system herald the *poésie automatique* of the surrealists.

Tzara himself found it difficult to support the notion of a discontinuity between his Romanian poems and his Dada poetry. When Sașa Pană in 1934 compiled the first edition of the Romanian poems, Tzara rejected the idea that his early poems might be described as “poems before Dada,” instead emphasizing the continuity “exceedingly linked to a latent necessity.”<sup>35</sup> Evidently Pană had suggested a title implying a break, which Tzara resolutely rejected, since it was rather a matter of a continuity through a series of more or less violent and decisive events. It is also evident that Tzara, already known as the Dada impresario, makes use of fairly long fragments of his Romanian poems in, for instance, *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine*.<sup>36</sup> In the letter to Jacques Doucet he says also that his poems in 1916 were only a reaction to the previous poems, which he defines as “too mild and careful” compared to the Zurich poems, according to Tzara “exaggeratedly brutal, containing shrieks like vigorously emphasized and quickly passing rhythms.”<sup>37</sup> According to Impey, Tzara’s Romanian poems are also a living proof of the same antiauthoritarian attitude and the same cosmopolitan approach that are expressed in, for instance, the dadaistic lampoon “Dada soulève tout” in 1921.<sup>38</sup>

Despite his young age Tzara was, in other words, unusually well prepared for what was to come when he boarded the train at Gara de Nord. According to Impey,<sup>39</sup> at least one of Dada’s molds must undoubtedly be searched for in a small country in the Balkan region, a country which in many respects had lived in the intellectual backwaters up to the mid-nineteenth century. According to Serge Fauchereau, the person who got off the train in Zurich was someone other than a small Romanian among the yokels.

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The Symbolist  
AND DADAIST  
from Moinești



FIGURE 7.1

Tristan Tzara in  
Rämistraße, Zurich,  
in 1918. Fondation Arp,  
Clamart-Meudon.



If Marcel Janco was tidy and exceptionally well dressed, Tristan Tzara was a real dandy, always irreproachably dressed in spats, white shirt, necktie, and monocle. Almost unanimous witnesses could have signed Stefan Zweig's description of Tzara as Marcel Janco's strong-willed partner, the philosopher or rather antiphilosopher, the poet, and the cosmic PR man, short in stature and energetic like Napoleon, walking with short, quick steps "like a girl."<sup>1</sup> According to Suzanne Perrottet, Tzara was extremely serious, tactful, discreet, and extraordinarily intelligent. Often he looked like he was dreaming with his big dark eyes, the head slightly on one side and a black strand of hair covering the right eye. The nose was delicately drawn, the mouth sensual, and he spoke with enthusiasm, very heartily, shortly: a good combination of reason, intentions, and feelings. According to Perrottet, Tzara was also the activist, always improvising, full of ideas, all aflame for new things, the dadaist who loved to incite the audience, even to infuriate it.<sup>2</sup> Hugo Ball explains that Tristan Tzara stood on the little stage of the Meierei looking sturdy and helpless, well armed with a black pince-nez; it was easy to think that cake and ham from his mother and father did not do him any harm.<sup>3</sup> According to Hans Richter, Ball's own qualities of thoughtfulness, profundity, and restraint were complemented by the fiery vivacity, the pugnacity, and the incredible intellectual mobility of the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara. He was a small man, but this made him all the more uninhibited. He was a David who knew how to hit every Goliath in exactly the right spot with a bit of stone, earth, or manure, with or without the accompaniment of witty bons-mots, retorts, and sharp splinters of linguistic granite. His crafty grin was full of humor but also full of tricks; there was never a dull moment with him. Always on the move, chattering away in German, French, or Romanian, he was the natural antithesis of the quiet, thoughtful Ball. According to Richter, Tzara was also a "splendid organizer" who could keep cool when the sea was running high. In his capacity as the "banker" of the movement, he was the only one who knew the essentials and acted according to them. Richter points also at Tzara's "French" or "Latin" temperament in relation to Dada's "Teutonic," unsophisticated, philosophically more serious qualities, explaining that this is due to the simple fact that Tzara came to Zurich from the little Paris of the Balkans.<sup>4</sup>

Because of his later break with Tzara, Marcel Janco's description is filled with reservations and more or less obvious pinpricks and could surely be rejected as colored, for the most part, by the evident animosity between the former friends, but for

the fact that Ball, for instance, clashed with him for reasons similar to those mentioned by Janco. If Hugo Ball was the director of the cabaret, Janco says, Tristan Tzara was its strategist, later also its propagandist. He was a short man with obvious poetic talents who knew how to capture the audience, but with a far too obvious predilection for the jingles that may be hung on the words. He was nervous, much-talented, but also a very diligent man. His good manners and his smile appeared to be useful in realizing his ambitions, for which he was prepared to pay any cost. Not to appear as a clown he walked with the small, fast, and resolute steps of a young lady. His small, malicious, inquiring eyes like a squirrel's sparkled behind his spectacles (when he didn't wear a monocle to mislead his friends and others). To carry Dada through the difficulties, he showed, according to Janco, as much organizational as police spirit. He wanted to register everything about the activities in an infallible card file without gaps with the help of as many press clippings and photos from all over the world as possible. By placing himself at the center of events he was also able to evoke as many echoes as he wished, which he then repeated without hesitation. Never has a poet been more skilled in using his vocal powers. He stood always seventeen meters from the walls and, to succeed better, he used to start his morning prayer with Descartes's words: "I don't want to know whether there has been any other before me." The director-inquisitor's files grew bigger and bigger, filled with remarks about different Dada expressions from all parts of the continent. Tzara's pride and self-conceit were expressed in loud shrieks and yelling, and woe betide those who dared to oppose him or wanted to have a look in the famous files. "It was simple: his name was wiped out of history."<sup>5</sup>

Like Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara longed for honor and fame and is often described as a ruthless climber. He was also one of those who first understood the suggestiveness of the word Dada as such and worked inexhaustibly for this word in his capacity as "propaganda minister": he bombarded both French and Italian avant-gardists with letters as early as February 1916, directly in connection with his first appearance at Cabaret Voltaire, when he was not yet twenty years of age.<sup>7</sup> Among his first international contacts we find Max Jacob, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Pierre Reverdy, through whom he could quickly be published in, for instance, Reverdy's magazine *Nord-Sud* and other dadaist French journals. Tzara also collaborated intensively with Fran-

cis Picabia and fostered valuable contacts with Marinetti and de Chirico in Milan, with Marius de Zayas in New York, and with scores of artists and writers in Berlin, Munich, and Hannover. Cooperating with Paul Éluard, Tzara made also an advertising leaflet that was distributed in Paris titled: “Société Anonyme pour l’exploitation du vocabulaire, Directeur: Tristan Tzara.” As mentioned before, Tzara was also responsible for initiating “Gesellschaft Voltaire” and the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire*, about which, according to Ball, he kept worrying for a long time.<sup>8</sup>

Tristan Tzara was probably also responsible for the press release that he, Hans Arp, and Walter Serner distributed to some thirty Swiss and international newspapers in July 1919, according to which a pistol duel had occurred on the Rehalp near Zurich between Tristan Tzara, “the renowned founder of Dadaism,” and the dadaist painter Hans Arp, at which four shots were fired.<sup>9</sup> At the fourth exchange Arp received a slight graze to his left thigh, whereupon the two opponents left the scene unreconciled. Acting as witnesses for Mr. Tzara were Messrs. Dr. Walter Serner and J. C. Heer, and for Mr. Arp Messrs. Otto Kokoschka and Francis Picabia. According to the press release, Picabia had traveled specially from Paris to Zurich for the event. Readers were also informed that the Zurich prosecutor’s office had already opened an investigation into all those involved; its findings would certainly interest the public greatly. J. C. Heer, a Swiss author of Alpine stories who was not averse to attending Dada events, wrote his own press release in which he disclaimed any part in the duel, and word soon got around that the two irreconcilable opponents were once again sitting peacefully together in their usual bar. Their subsequent disclaimer asserting that the previous release was “a complete fabrication from someone wishing us ill” received equal publicity.

Much of Tristan Tzara’s fame in Paris was built upon the Dada manifesto which he read on 23 July 1918 in the Meise Hall in Zurich, first published in *Dada* 3 in December of that year.<sup>10</sup> According to the manifesto, for instance, Dada simply doesn’t mean anything—the writer of the manifesto writes that he is against manifestos in principle, as he is against principles. He writes the manifesto only to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air: “I am against action; for continuous contradictions, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense.” The Parisian avant-gardists were consequently nervously awaiting his arrival two years later, and were,



according to André Breton,<sup>11</sup> extremely disappointed at the famous dadaist, while he openly enjoyed himself, made witty remarks, repeated stunts that had worked in the past, and exploited his personal charm as best he could, “but in an increasingly narrow field.” According to Breton, the manifesto appeared to throw open the doors, but the French group soon discovered that these doors led into a corridor that turned around on itself. Part of the disappointment, according to Malcolm Green, may lie in Christian Schad’s assertion that large portions of the manifesto were the work of Walter Serner rather than Tzara;<sup>12</sup> Breton was aware of this accusation and in *Après Dada* in 1922 he claimed that Serner had specifically come to Paris to expose Tzara’s plagiarism. Two years later Breton went one step further, proclaiming that up to now it had seemed distasteful to him to denounce the bad faith of Tzara and that he had allowed Tzara to go on “using with impunity the papers of those whom he robbed,” but that now he was no longer reluctant to silence this careerist from Bucharest.<sup>13</sup>

According to the Romanian literary scholar Nicolae Țone, Tristan Tzara showed his calculating and aspiring trait of character already in Bucharest.<sup>14</sup> Țone suggests that large parts of Tzara’s poetry written in Zurich realized ideas that he carried inside himself before he left for the Swiss city and that he, unlike other great poets, elevated his ambition to a literary project in itself. Undoubtedly his poetic sources trace their origin back to the creations already manifested before leaving Bucharest, and, according to Țone, Zurich was only the springboard of those “poetic values” already acquired. According to Țone, one may easily imagine Tzara in Zurich standing in front of the mirror preparing himself for the role of the jester, because this role had proved so successful at the coffeehouses and the literary salons of Bucharest. This was the time when Chaplin’s star was shining most brightly on the wide screen, a figure also acting like an ingenious clown, and, according to Țone, one cannot exclude the possibility that the Romanian poet also made preparations for a career in the movie business.

Both the 1918 manifesto and, for instance, the play *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine*, including the manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine, are unmistakable high points of the activities in Zurich. Though the manifesto may have been written partly by Walter Serner, it coincides too congenially with Tzara’s dadaism to be excluded from his Dada production without reservations. *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine*

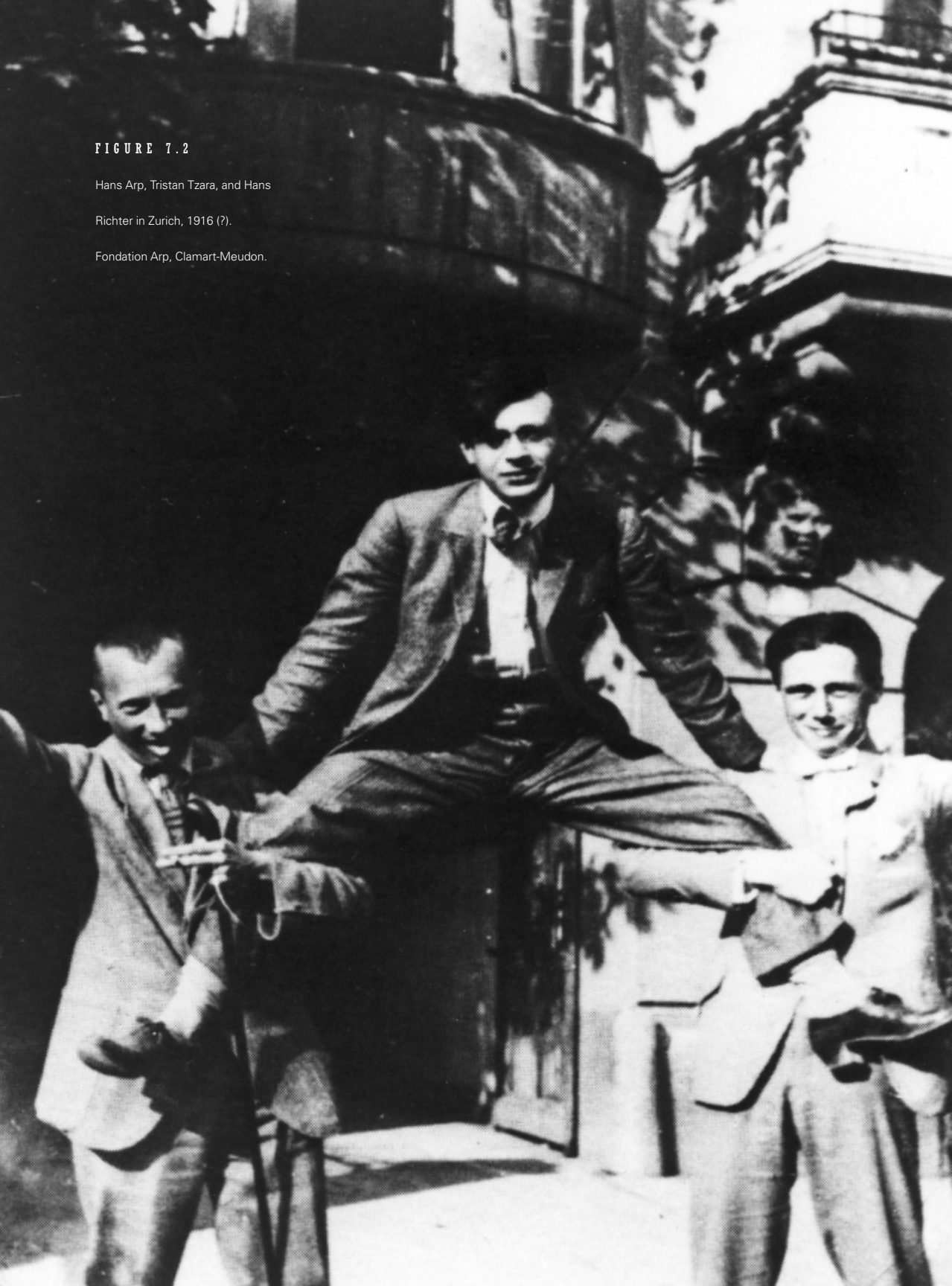
appears like a play within a play, a kind of melodramatic piece woven into the “plot” which rolls up during the seemingly chaotic performance.<sup>15</sup> Marcel Janco was responsible for the stage setting on the basis of simple, improvised sketches, according to himself “full of fantasy, fresh and unexpected.” The play was advertised as “cured impotence,” and according to the writer the intention was to cure the contemporary literary impotence and thereby to restore the magic forces of the word by creating a verbal correspondence to the visual collage in contemporary art. The one-act play, which also was published in an edition of ten copies with woodcuts by Janco, without any stage directions, was characterized by Tzara himself as a boxing match with words. The play starts with a figure called “Tristan Tzara” reading some totally inconceivable nonsense verses, accompanied a few moments later by nine other dadaistically provoking characters or actors, namely Bleubleu, Crici, Boum-Boum, Mr. Antipyrine, Pipi, Npala Garoo, La Parapole, and the Impresario, together with a pregnant woman. We don’t know who was playing the part of whom, but probably at least Tzara played the part of “Tzara” as well as the part of Mr. Antipyrine, as he did when the play was produced again in Paris four years later. The text itself grows out of an almost incalculable labyrinth of impenetrable phrases interfoliated by different pseudo-African expressions and phonetic babble, detached vowels, diphthongs, and linguistic images with the stress consciously laid upon the orally produced sound values: “immense, pause, pense, pense etpence pense . . . la cathédrale, drale . . . drale . . . rendre, prendre, entre.” The text flow is built up by endlessly proceeding rhythms, childish songlike strings of sound, grammatically illogical breaks of the sentences, and pure nonsense suggesting collage combinations verbally crumpled up like the simultaneous poems. The title itself is ambiguous, and “antipyrine” has been interpreted as referring to a fire extinguisher (it is also the name of the most popular brand of aspirin in Switzerland at that time). All inherited theatrical conventions are denounced, and neither the reader nor the audience is able to focus on any narrative structure or cathartic rise or intensification but is dragged into the absorbing textuality of the text itself and its acoustic flow of energy. The fact that the sound values of the words are so emphasized also points at their hollowness or even emptiness and in the end at the impossibility of any rational communication. Particularly the use of endless repetitions and mutually unrelated sentences and words appears to be a way to block communication and may be

FIGURE 7.2

Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, and Hans

Richter in Zurich, 1916 (?).

Fondation Arp, Clamart-Meudon.



related to Tzara's own experiences of struggling with French in an unfamiliar language environment, a bilingual one, moreover, with two foreign languages influencing and disturbing each other and in which speakers must be keenly alive to semantic nuances to be able to communicate with each other. This may also be the reason why Tristan Tzara is so obviously fascinated by illogical combinations of unrelated fragments from spoken dialogues and simple everyday talk, combinations that in the end sabotage the logical semantic order as well as the rational flow of thought. The language loses its character as a logical system and becomes an inventory of its own elements and means, an "alphabet" in the broadest sense of the word, a kind of self-shaping material within which the nonhierarchical order corresponds to the chaotic reality outside language. The absurdity of this language mirrors the absurd reality that conventional language tries to cover. Thus, Tzara is trying to overcome and transcend the established language using an aesthetics based on "the magic of the word," recalling Hugo Ball's speculations in the so-called opening manifesto of 1916 in which Ball says that conventional language is "soiled by the hands of stockbrokers"; in his diary Ball explains that the dadaists have driven "the plasticity of the word" to the point where it can scarcely be equaled and that they have achieved this at the expense of the rational, logically constructed sentence.<sup>16</sup> According to the German literary scholar Inge Kümmerle, Tzara had realized that chaos can be expressed only by using a language reduced to its "alphabet," the starting point for a hope which, a priori, cannot be formulated without being perverted but which at the same time must be the basis of a "lived" poetry, an *activité de l'esprit*: poetry is constituted beyond language and can only be written in a language expressing its own constitution.<sup>17</sup>

In using exotic rhythmic words of a pseudo-African language, Tristan Tzara followed the same inspiration that made him a collector of African and Oceanian art. In this he was evidently inspired by Huelsenbeck's weakness for African drumming rhythms; in the Antipyrine play these are linked to images of pure sexuality and stinking excrement when, for instance, the character Tzara describes the male sexual organ as covered by lead thicker than the volcano at Mgabati, at the same time as Bleubleu literally shits out the manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine, according to which the dadaists "spit on humanity" to descend, like a seraph, in a public bath to piss; "it's shit after all but from now on we mean to shit in assorted colors and bedeck the artistic

zoo with the flags of every consulate.”<sup>18</sup> On the whole, *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine* is characterized by more or less evident references to the infantile stage of human experience, and therefore it cannot be a mere coincidence that Tzara in the manifesto within the play seems to dream of returning to a time when art was only a “game of trinkets”: “children collected words with a tinkling on the end then they went and shouted stanzas and they put little doll’s shoes on the stanza and the stanza turned into a queen to die a little and the queen turned into a wolverine and the children ran till they all turned green.”<sup>19</sup>

The “childish” experience of language as an “absurd” conventional system of signs returns also in the shape of a kind of sounding board in the manifesto of 1918, according to which “some learned journalists” regard Dada as an “art for babies,” while others see it as a “holy jesusescallingthelittlechildren of our day” or as a relapse into a noisy and monotonous primitivism. In fact, Tzara assures, it is only about an “inability to distinguish between degrees of clarity: to lick the penumbra and float in the big mouth filled with honey and excrement.” Tzara is also fully aware of the paradox of being forced to use conventional language, the cultural system of values, and the logic which he opposes. Already in the introductory part of the 1918 manifesto he declares that you “must want ABC” and “fulminate against 1, 2, 3” to put out a manifesto, at the same time as he says that you must “organize prose into a form of absolute and irrefutable evidence, to prove your non plus ultra and maintain that novelty resembles life just as the latest appearance of some whore proves the essence of God.” Here he indicates already the main theme of the manifesto,<sup>20</sup> which is the notion of the impossibility of writing a Dada manifesto with the help of the codes of conventional language. The manifesto is filled with dadaist contradictions and non sequiturs, and using this strategy Tzara succeeds in deconstructing logic and common sense in a way recalling the Nietzschean deconstruction of Western logocentrism. Tzara disbelieves everything; first of all he denounces rationality, sciences, morality, and honor, and condemns every system of codes constituting and maintaining the prevailing hierarchical order. Tzara is almost overexplicit in explaining his motives:

*I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am also against principles (half pints to*

*measure the moral value of every phrase too too convenient; approximation was invented by the impressionists). I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air; I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense.<sup>21</sup>*

The dadaists recognize no theory, Tzara declares, because “we have enough cubist and futurist academies,” those “laboratories of formal ideas.” Of course, Tzara rejects dialectics as well, which, according to him, is “the system of quickly looking at the other side of a thing in order to impose your opinion indirectly,” in other words, “haggling over the spirit of fried potatoes while dancing method around it.” Thus:

*If I cry out:*

*Ideal, ideal, ideal,*

*Knowledge, knowledge, knowledge,*

*Boomboom, boomboom, boomboom*

*I have given a pretty faithful version of progress, law, morality and all other fine qualities that various highly intelligent men have discussed in so many books, only to conclude that after all everyone dances to his own personal boomboom.<sup>22</sup>*

“There is no ultimate Truth,” Tzara says, explaining that the dialectic is only an amusing mechanism that guides us to the opinion we had in the first place. Does anyone think, Tzara asks, that, by a minute refinement of logic, he has demonstrated the truth and established the correctness of these opinions? Science disgusts Tzara too as soon as it becomes a speculative system and loses its character of utility, as he also detests “greasy objectivity” and harmony, “the science that finds everything in order.” He is against all kinds of systems, and the most acceptable system is on principle to have none—

*Logic is always wrong. It draws the threads of notions, words, in their formal exterior, toward illusory ends and centers. Its chains kill, it is an enormous centipede stifling independence. Married to logic, art would live in incest,*

*swallowing, engulfing its own tail, still part of its own body, fornicating within itself, and passion would become a nightmare tarred with protestantism, a monument, a heap of ponderous gray entrails.*<sup>23</sup>

According to Tzara, every man must realize that there is “a great negative work of destruction” to be accomplished. “We must sweep and clean.” “Without aim or design, without organization: indomitable madness, decomposition.” We must abolish logic, “the dance of those impotent to create.” We must abolish every social hierarchy and “equation set up for the sake of values by our valets” in favor of individuality and all individuals “in their folly of the moment,” whether it be serious, timid, ardent, vigorous, determined, or enthusiastic: “Freedom: Dada Dada Dada, a roaring of tense colors, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE.”<sup>24</sup>

Referring to himself, “kind bourgeois,” Tristan Tzara declares already in the 1916 manifesto of Mr. Antipyrine that Dada is neither madness nor wisdom nor irony but “life without carpet slippers or parallels,” for and against unity and definitely against future. However, Tzara wouldn’t be Tristan Tzara if he didn’t give the term Dada a specific mystical aura, tempting us into interpretations in regard to both its “meaning” and its origin. Thus, he explained in the 1918 manifesto that in Dada “you have a word that leads ideas to the hunt,” as he also tempts us into “finding its etymological, or at least its historical or psychological origin.” And Tzara is explicitly careful in choosing his words, as will be shown: “We see by the papers that the Kru negroes call the tail of a holy cow Dada. The cube and the mother in a certain district of Italy are called: Dada. A hobby horse, a nurse both in Russian and Rumanian: Dada.”<sup>25</sup>

Hugo Ball too is careful in choosing the words in the so-called opening manifesto of 1916 when explaining that Dada comes from the dictionary and that everything is, in fact, very, very simple: in French *dada* means “hobbyhorse”; in German it means “Good-bye, I don’t mind, see you again, another time.” In Romanian *dada* means “Yes, you are right, yes indeed.” The first time the word Dada is mentioned in Ball’s diary is, actually, only two months earlier, namely on 18 April, and Ball may actually be right in saying that his proposal to call the planned anthology *Dada* was accepted by the other dadaists at the Meierei, though in the event the anthology was called

*Cabaret Voltaire*, probably because the term Dada meanwhile had come to signify the whole current or rather its artistic approach instead of being only a periodical. Already now the Romanian dimension is indicated, as both Hugo Ball and therefore probably the rest of the dadaists as well agree that Dada means “yes, yes” in Romanian: “*Dada* is ‘yes, yes’ in Rumanian, ‘rocking horse’ and ‘hobbyhorse’ in French. For Germans it is a sign of foolish naïveté, joy in procreation, and preoccupation with the baby carriage.”<sup>26</sup>

The stories about who invented or discovered the short but extremely efficient word are almost as many as the activists at the Meierei. Though half of these were Romanian, this could scarcely have been the reason why most of them were agreed about the fact that Tristan Tzara was the man who coined the term. Hans Arp is even able to point to the exact date and time when the word was conceived, namely on 8 February 1916 at six o’clock in the afternoon, at the Café de la Terrasse in Zurich.<sup>27</sup>

Marcel Janco too agrees that it was Tzara who found the word, although he locates the event at Café Bellevue instead of Café de la Terrasse;<sup>28</sup> he also passes on the legend, launched by Tzara himself, of Tzara’s finding the word by chance in *Larousse* (according to the revised version of the story published in the journal *New York Dada* in April 1921). In *New York Dada* Tzara explains—as is his wont—that the anthology, officially published by Hugo Ball, was his own “enterprise” and that he suggested that the periodical should be called *Dada*. According to the American scholar John Elderfield, though, it seems most likely that it was Ball and Huelsenbeck together who found the word in a French-German dictionary that Ball was using to research his *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*.<sup>29</sup> According to Hans J. Kleinschmidt, there is no doubt that it was in fact only Huelsenbeck who let his finger wander on the pages of *Larousse*;<sup>30</sup> Huelsenbeck’s ire at Tzara’s claim knew no bounds, and even as late as 1949, in a manifesto, he continued his attack on Tzara over this matter. According to Kleinschmidt the controversy over priority can be put to rest by Ball’s letter to Huelsenbeck of 8 November 1926, in which Ball tells Huelsenbeck about his diary and asks him to write a few lines about the book and Dada: “You would then have the last word in the matter, just as you had the first.” However, Huelsenbeck himself writes in 1920 that the word was accidentally discovered by Ball and himself in a German-French dictionary as they were looking for a name for Madame le Roy, one of the singers at the cabaret.<sup>31</sup>



According to a theory introduced much later, the word refers to soap products made by the perfume company Bergmann & Co. which dominated the Swiss market at the turn of the century and of which all except one particular lilywort soap were called Dada.<sup>32</sup> The fact that the company's logotype contained two cockhorses crossing each other doesn't make the theory less reliable, as it seems to support the singer Marietta di Monaco's version according to which it was Hugo Ball who came up with the idea of the hobbyhorse and that it was exactly this horse which was associated with the word Dada, a word which the Romanians immediately accepted.<sup>33</sup>

However, although Tristan Tzara's role at the baptism of Dada is highly disputed, it may be linked to a, from the Romanian point of view, most interesting circumstance that seems to confirm the suggestion that it was Tzara after all who was responsible for the baptism, and which at the same time brings Dada closer to its Romanian sources than noticed before. Nicolae Țone delivers a somewhat curious if not sensational piece of information connecting Tzara's birthday with the feast day of the holy martyr Dada in the old Orthodox calendar of saints.<sup>34</sup> In fact the Romanian Orthodox Church has not one but two saints by the name of Dada, one of whom—together with Maximianus and Quintilianus—suffered martyrdom under the Emperor Diocletian in 286 and is celebrated on 28 April (in the new calendar used since the turn of the twentieth century). This saint, a Thracian, was convicted by the Roman authorities in Durostorum, today Silistria in Bulgaria, and suffered martyrdom in the village of Ozovia in Dobruja. In fact there seems to be a correspondence between Saint Dada and Tristan Tzara's birthday, 16 April 1896 old style, a date that is confirmed by the birth certificate in the city archive of Moinești.<sup>35</sup> Țone's assertion becomes more perplexed when one consults the source to which he also refers, namely the Romanian Victor Macarie's calculations in 1996,<sup>36</sup> according to which the changeover from the old calendar to the new one in Romania means that, with a few exceptions, you add twelve days to the old calendar to get the feast day of the new one (so that Tzara's birthday of 16 April old style should have corresponded with the saint's feast day of 28 April new style). Alas, Saint Dada's feast day was actually celebrated on 13 April in the old calendar (being one of the exceptions), so that the correspondence becomes a kind of play with numbers.<sup>37</sup>

Anyway, it may be not just a dadaist joke but an expression of an intuitive understanding of the "true essence" of Dada when Michel Sanouillet claims that there



FIGURE 7.3

Advertisement, Zurich, 1895.

is only one word in our cultural history enjoying the same privileges as the word Dada, namely God.<sup>38</sup> And doesn't Kurt Schwitters say that "Jesus Christ was the first dadaist," just as Richard Huelsenbeck claims that "Dada guarantees eternal life. Invest in Dada (Jesus saves)"?<sup>39</sup>

Emmy Hennings thought of the first one to perform on the little stage of the Meierei on that memorable first day of Cabaret Voltaire, 5 February 1916, that the beautiful dark-haired young man was a little boy who had run away from home.<sup>40</sup> He looked like he was in love, pulling out of his pockets crumpled pieces of paper and expressing his homesickness in touching, resolute poems, poems that Hugo Ball describes as "traditional-style" poems.<sup>41</sup> Whether Tristan Tzara read the poems in Romanian or, as he himself says in the "Zurich Chronicle,"<sup>42</sup> quickly translated them into French cannot be determined, though Ball's claim in *Cabaret Voltaire* that it was a matter of "Romanian verses" indicates that Tzara actually read them in his native language.<sup>43</sup> In any case, the poems have been identified as probably "Nocturna" and "Însereaza,"<sup>44</sup> two melancholic, sentimentally dreamy poems written in 1913 and 1912, respectively, of which especially the latter depicts a pastoral love scene full of sorrow and sentimentality:

*The fishermen return with the stars of the waters  
they dole food to the poor, string heads for the blind,  
the emperors go out in the parks at this hour resembling the ancients of engravings  
and the domestics bathe the hunting dogs  
the light puts on gloves  
let the wind therefore open  
and you night pass out of the room like a kernel out of a peach,  
like a priest out of church  
god: he is combing the wool of the submissive loves,  
painting birds in ink, renewing watches on the moon.  
"let's catch cockchafers  
put them in a box"  
"let's go to the brook  
some clay pots let's do"*

*“let’s go to the well let me kiss you”  
“let’s go to the public park  
till the cock will crow  
let the town get indignant”  
“or let’s go lie in the barn loft, the hay  
will prickle you and hear those are the cows chewing the cud  
later they’ll miss their calves  
let’s go, let’s go away.”<sup>45</sup>*

If we are to believe Hugo Ball, the melancholic mood seems to have lasted at least a few weeks. According to him, the syllables sounded so moving and resolute that everyone fell in love with the young poet reading on 28 February “with tender melancholy” the last lines of Max Jacob’s poem “La côte”: “Adieu ma mère, adieu mon père.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, was Emmy Hennings actually right in asserting that Tristan Tzara longed for home, for his mother and father?

Both general handbooks and more specialized studies give the impression that Tristan Tzara’s literary career started on that famous night when a precocious genius and charming, extremely well-dressed dandy first read at Cabaret Voltaire. Few make any effort to link his literary achievements and ambitions to any genealogical development anchored in his biographical origin or in any previous specific cultural environment, though most dutifully note that Tzara, like the Janco brothers, was born and grew up in Romania. This is true even of the few Romanian scholars specializing in the Romanian avant-garde; almost all of them avoid both those cultural and specifically biographical impulses that must have influenced Tzara’s literary intentions. The most basic demands upon empirical verification are avoided as well by elegant rhetoric. A great deal of this seems to be caused by a research tradition that in many respects—due to political considerations and deficient archival and library resources—is more familiar with rhetorical hints and political blandishments than with empirically verified facts. If this is the case for those who have studied the avant-garde, those scholars active during the communist regime are either totally uninterested in avant-garde modes of expression or characterized by a political

conformity recalling that of pre-World War I Romania. Thus, for instance, Constantin Ciopraga is free to accuse the symbolists of the turn of the century of not bothering about the “authentic cultural organism” linked to the Romanian peasant culture, of expressing certain “connections full of contradictions” rather than an original “ensemble,” an organic totality. According to Ciopraga, the symbolists’ literary elements are interspersed with “abnormal moods and other disturbances,” as, for instance, Ion Minulescu and several other symbolists show “macabre accumulations” and mad individuals; the sense of humor does not follow any norms, everything is shattered, and instead of the good, positive completeness an absurd microcosm is expressed, furthermore without being linked to material reality.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, there is as yet no good foundation for studying the cultural background and specific prerequisites of the Romanian avant-garde. Furthermore, the paucity of Western scholars interested in the Romanian context cannot be due solely to the Iron Curtain but must depend on Western European ethnocentrism as well, so common in the research field.

In any case, it is, of course, possible to verify empirically that Samuel Rosenstock was born on 16 April 1896 in Moinești in the Bacău region some hundred kilometers south of Iași,<sup>48</sup> the capital of Moldavia, which had been united with Wallachia in 1859 during the reign of Prince Alexandru Ion Cuza and which had belonged to the Romanian “nuclear territory” since the liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878 and the coronation of King Carol I three years later. Moinești, located in the mountains and surrounded by forested mountain peaks interspersed with fields in the valleys, had been granted its town charter already by the end of the eighteenth century and by 1900 could no longer be characterized as a small town according to contemporary standards, its population reaching almost 5,000 families, of whom the majority earned their living as shopkeepers, merchants, and workers in the forest industry.<sup>49</sup>

There are claims that Samuel Rosenstock’s father Filip Rosenstock was a merchant,<sup>50</sup> whereas other information indicates that he supported himself and his family, including his wife Emilie (née Sybalis), Samuel, and his sister Lucie-Marie, as a tenant and owner of a sawmill, or in some other way involved in the forest industry.<sup>51</sup> In the birth certificate of his son, Filip Rosenstock was registered as “functionary,” while in his son’s school report from the “Israelite” school in Moinești, at which Samuel Rosenstock studied from 1902 to 1906, he is called *comersant*, merchant.<sup>52</sup>



FIGURE 7.4

Moinești, postcard at the turn  
of the century.



**FIGURE 7.5**

Filip Rosenstock.

Mira Rinzler, Naples, Florida.



**FIGURE 7.6**

Emilie Rosenstock, née Zibalis.

Mira Rinzler, Naples, Florida.

Remarkable also is the fact that one of the father's sisters, Amalia Rosenstock, owned the cinemas Rahova, Gloria, and Lia, as well as a popular summer restaurant in Bucharest; she was also the first in Romania to show sound films at the famous ARO cinema in Bucharest.<sup>53</sup> The fact that the family spent most of its summers at the grandfather's estate in Gârceni as well as the fact that Filip Rosenstock after moving to Bucharest around 1910 supported the family by selling forest estates in Moldavia and thanks to interest yields from holdings of shares show that the family belonged to the upper classes of Moinești.<sup>54</sup> The estate in Gârceni consisted of three dwelling-houses, the grandfather's house being the biggest, in the center of the estate, with Filip Rosenstock's house to the left. To the right one could see through the trees, mostly oaks, a big residential house for the workers as well as the sawmill, behind which was "La Busteni," large untouched woodlands where young Rosenstock often rode on his own horse in the company of Eugen Iovanaki, with whom he also shared his interest in music; the grandfather Ilie Rosenstock, married to Clara "Haia" Mendelsohn,<sup>55</sup> was a passionate horseman, a would-be boyar in the grand old style.<sup>56</sup> One cannot judge whether Tzara describes his childhood home in Moinești or the estate in Gârceni when he tells in 1923 of the parents living in an enormously big house with an equally big garden with a rippling brook and an artificial waterfall, which he himself had built.<sup>57</sup>

The fact that the family was wealthy enough is shown also by the information<sup>58</sup> that young Samuel, or "Sami" as his parents and his sister called him, after the school in Moinești went to a private school conducted in French;<sup>59</sup> after the family's move to Bucharest he continued his studies as a special pupil of the Mihai Viteazul upper secondary school there, receiving six marks of ten at the examination for the final degree in September of 1914, then registered at the university to study mathematics and philosophy.<sup>60</sup> In 1923 Tzara himself related that he had neglected the school, the games, and the schoolmates because he was totally absorbed by his early writing, a lonely endeavor that gave him temporary relief from sudden fainting fits and the frequent headache of which he suffered especially during the summers and which could go on for more than a month: only bromide helped temporarily and the writing became a vice, as indispensable as it was secret.<sup>61</sup>

According to himself, Tzara began writing in his "earliest adolescence" without asking why.<sup>62</sup> His fictionally doctored memories claim that he wrote out of resistance



to his family, in secret, in order to understand a disproportionately developed side of himself. The results were interesting only for himself, and as a matter of habit the spiritual mitigation which this therapy gave him soon became an amusement which he himself thought was a latent vice, a jolly vice which at the same time calmed his “bad character.” His “merely improvised” writings were for a long time, for the most part, a materialization of disgust and repugnance, mostly at himself. He didn’t fight any longer against his own weakness and foibles but incorporated them into his own life and consciously developed his impurity and his vices. He became, he admits, a stern opportunist searching for an excuse for “the indefatigable conversation between my blood and my brains.”

At only thirteen years old Samuel Rosenstock fell in love—in Moinești or in Gârceni—with a fifteen-year-old girl called Louise, who shared his musical and literary interests but who married two years later one of the admirer’s cousins. Young Rosenstock in heat was too shy to approach Louise, convinced that she simply didn’t know what kind of riches he was willing to lay before her feet. All day long he admired his own naked body in front of the mirror and dreamed about Louise looking at him. He was thunderstruck by the fact that she preferred someone else. He didn’t want to see her any longer and felt embarrassed in her presence, firmly convinced that she was unhappy. Between attacks of giddiness the young man dreamed of women with ample bosoms and painted lips and felt how his male instrument was seized by a devilish force wherever he was, at the table, while speaking to somebody, while sitting with a book, riding, walking, or doing something else—and lost his innocence thanks to Eugen Iovanaki, who apparently took him to a brothel.

It seems like a dadaist joke, but the oldest preserved text that the future dadaist wrote and read before an audience is an exceptionally well-designed and erudite composition on the importance and history of hygiene<sup>63</sup> which Samuel Rosenstock read before his school’s headmaster, the teachers, and his classmates on 6 March 1910, and in which already in the subtitle he reminded the audience that the word “hygiene” itself is of Greek origin and means “to behave well.” As one might expect from a fourteen-year-old schoolboy “behaving well,” he starts with a short definition of the subject, according to which hygiene is a “science dealing with preservation and improvement of our health,” thus showing what is good and what is bad for our body and giving us the necessary advice for keeping our health in good condition.



FIGURE 7.7

Samuel Rosenstock with his  
sister Lucie-Marie.

Mira Rinzler, Naples, Florida.



**FIGURE 7.8**

Samuel Rosenstock with  
Eugen Iovanaki in Gărceni,  
c. 1915. Muzeul Literaturii  
Române, Bucharest.

Referring to Rousseau's conviction that everybody without exception is afraid of dying, the young writer explains that precisely this fear of death is what once upon a time determined the quick development of hygiene in the scientific sense from antiquity onward, from Hippocrates to Pasteur and modern bacteriology. Young Rosenstock tells also that 110 persons died of smallpox in Germany in 1889; in the same year, in Romania, with a population one-eighth the size of Germany's, 985 persons died of the same disease, due to the fact that most of the population was unvaccinated. According to Rosenstock, during 1880–1890 almost 21,000 persons died of variola in Romania, a number that easily could have been reduced by 20,000 persons if the rules of hygiene had been respected. Rosenstock tells also that an average of 800 inhabitants of Vienna died of typhus annually before 1873, after which the mortality rate decreased step by step to only 95 persons in 1885 thanks to the building of a new system of water mains. In Bucharest, 19 out of 10,000 inhabitants died of typhus annually up to 1884 due to the fact that most of the water was taken from the polluted Dâmbovița river. After 1884, when the Dâmbovița was supplied with a sewerage system and the filters at Bâcu were installed, the rate of mortality from typhus substantially decreased to 5 persons out of 10,000 annually—“This is one of the great advantages which we owe to hygiene.” Another relevant example that certifies the efforts is diphtheria, Rosenstock adds, and points to the fact that today only 2–3 children out of 100 suffer from diphtheria in Romania.

According to Serge Fauchereau,<sup>64</sup> one believes one is in the presence of a pastiche when reading the very first symbolist-influenced poem that Samuel Rosenstock published, printed in the inaugural issue of *Simbolul* under the pseudonym S. Samyro and titled “Pe râul vieții.”<sup>65</sup> But, Fauchereau adds, the poem is written in real earnest; one must only persuade oneself that the person who wrote it was only sixteen years old. His other poems published in *Simbolul* as well, “Cântec” in the second issue in November, “Poveste” in the third issue, and “Dans de fée” in the fourth issue in December, are strongly influenced by literary symbolism, even to the extent that the young poet has been described as a poor imitator of symbolism. According to the Romanian scholar Mircea Scarlat, Samuel Rosenstock knows very well that he must learn the craft first in order to be able to “squeeze” the literary conventions and use them in new, shocking constellations.<sup>66</sup> Bearing the French-inspired Romanian context in

mind, which was the hotbed for the young poet Samuel Rosenstock's transformation into Tristan Tzara, it is significant also that some of his earliest sources of inspiration were French, for instance the symbolists and early modernists Maeterlinck, Verhaeren, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Verlaine, all of them very well known in Romania as well.<sup>67</sup> This is shown also by the fact that Rosenstock already in Bucharest seems to have chosen a pseudonym after Tristan Corbière,<sup>68</sup> the rebel of late nineteenth-century French poetry who inspired Adrian Maniu too and to whom Tzara returned in 1950 when writing the introduction to a new edition of Corbière's *Les amours jaunes*;<sup>69</sup> and by the fact that he read Corbière, Max Jacob, André Salmon, and Jules Laforgue at Cabaret Voltaire when not reading his own poems. Evidently he had a special relationship with both Corbière and Laforgue, with whom he must have become acquainted already in Bucharest, or even in Moinești; Corbière must have been specifically attractive in regard to the fact that, having English roots, he was a stranger in France, like Samuel Rosenstock, as a Jew a "foreigner" in Romania; both Corbière and Rosenstock had to learn French as their second language as well. Also interesting—along with the fact that Tristan Corbière too is a pseudonym (of Charles Cros)—is the fact that Tzara so explicitly points at both Corbière's loneliness and the fact that the constantly present revolt in Corbière's poetry goes back to his ambiguous relationship with his father.<sup>70</sup>

According to the American scholar Robert Mitchell, Charles Cros—Tristan Corbière—is a menace to traditional French poetry, difficult to categorize but nevertheless linked to both Mallarmé and Valéry because of his linguistic games and puzzles, subtleties, ambiguities and equivocal metaphoric expressions, verbal combinations of sounds, and musical sequences of words and fragments and sentences.<sup>71</sup> If Samuel Rosenstock suffered from recurrent headache, Corbière suffered from chronic rheumatism and tuberculosis, which may have been a contributing reason for his distanced flâneur attitude and which, according to Mitchell, was also the reason for his turning to poetry for relief, which in turn recalls how Rosenstock transforms his writing into a secret, therapeutic vice in connection with his regular headache. Corbière's poetry is also characterized by an ironic distance from humanity in general and from French bourgeois society in particular; many of his poems try to destroy the prosodic standard solutions of French poetry and are filled with puns and everyday expres-

sions, irregular metrical forms, seemingly free associations of images, paradoxical combinations of sentences, incorrect grammar, and conscious misspellings.

For Tristan Tzara,<sup>72</sup> Tristan Corbière is a tremendously lonely man who in his poetry, characterized by constant repetitions and ellipses, expresses the frustration caused by the fact that the words themselves prevented him from communicating with his fellow-beings, a lonely man among lonely creatures all of whom are living in a violently communicating world where curses and conjurations have replaced authentic intercourse. Corbière belongs to those who long for a dialogue with others but find that the dialogue is prevented and for this reason suffer from bitter distress and agony, finding that the words are both ridiculous and a sort of criminal instrument. Revolt is the only thing remaining, and this is caused, according to Tzara, by the ambivalent relationship with his father. According to Tzara, Corbière is torn between his strong admiration for his father and an equally strong disgust when he discovers that his father's bragging and swaggering seaman's stories are nothing but pure figments of his own heated imagination. Bearing in mind Tzara's own Jewish origin and social status, it is also remarkable that he so explicitly notes that Corbière manifests the bourgeois artist's social protest by dissociating himself from the class in which he was born, like Lautréamont, and tries to create a zone of silence around himself with the help of explicit exaggerations and mystifications.

Like Corbière, Jules Laforgue too suffered from chronic tuberculosis that caused his death in 1887 in the age of twenty-seven.<sup>73</sup> In the same year his parodic short stories were published in the collection *Moralités légendaires*; during his short lifetime he had published five collections, among them *Les complaints* and *L'imitation de Notre-Dame la lune* in 1885 and 1886, respectively, collections whose motifs reveal their importance for young Rosenstock. Laforgue is as lonely as Corbière and as interested in mathematics, philosophy, and aesthetics as Samuel Rosenstock; already as a young boy in Paris he distributed carefully chosen quotations by Heinrich Heine, known for his skepticism, cynicism, and irony, and referred often to Schopenhauer's description of Heine as "the jester of geniuses."

Although Corbière's *Les amours jaunes* had a certain success in 1873, the critics described Laforgue's *Les complaints* twelve years later as much too "ultramodern," though "the modern" and the burlesque were in vogue. A dominating trait is the inner

monologue, the multiplicity of voices, and more or less trivial images from the everyday world, which also clearly indicate that they are meant to be read aloud or sung. The collection is also an extremely personal mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary, where trivial things and phenomena are confronted with the sublime and the fantastic. Like Samuel Rosenstock in Moinești or in Bucharest, Laforgue too is fascinated by the Hamlet figure; Laforgue confronts Hamlet with Pierrot in his pseudo-religious parody *L'imitation de Notre-Dame la lune*. In fact, Hamlet was extremely popular in the contemporary French artistic milieu, reflected, for instance, in Delacroix's lithographs, highly esteemed by Baudelaire and a source of inspiration for Laforgue as well. Laforgue wrote a short story in 1885 in which he pays special attention to Hamlet's essential artistic "inability to live" and in which he transforms Shakespeare's tragic figure into a parody on a decadent aesthete à la Huysmans's *des Esseintes* driven by indifference and weariness. Laforgue systematically disparages the hero's dramatic greatness and transforms Hamlet's father into a vulgar sexual adventurer, while the queen appears to be a liar and Hamlet himself the son of a Gypsy girl who died when he was born.

Laforgue's best-known accomplishment is the dramatized inner monologue in the posthumous *Derniers vers* (1890), which is also labeled as the first collection of French poetry entirely written in "prose" inspired by Verlaine and Walt Whitman, whom Laforgue also translated into French. The collection consists of small-scale dramatic situations reflected in dialogues cut in pieces between, for instance, former lovers and potential lovers or lonely wanderers in unfamiliar urban environments, empty summer hotels, or desert woods. The properties and the descriptions of the social milieus are partly identical with corresponding descriptions in Samuel Rosenstock's early poems: wet park benches, telephone poles along desert roads, empty squares, barred houses, windows with curtains drawn, desolate railway stations, and wet shiny quays and embankments. Everything is permeated by tired melancholy and deep sadness; not even love brings any consolation or reconciliation. Thus, the collection starts with the quotation from Hamlet, typical of Laforgue: "Get thee to a nunnery."

It is more than evident that Samuel Rosenstock must have read not only, for instance, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Verlaine, but in particular both Corbière and Laforgue and let himself be inspired by their sad and somewhat absurd poetry.



**FIGURE 7.9**

Unknown, *Samuel Rosenstock*.

Mira Rinzler, Naples, Florida.



The Romanian context is characterized by the fact that the Romanian writers did not synchronize their symbolism with the contemporary, academicized phase of French symbolism, but went straight to the sources and sought out none other than Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé. Characteristic of this kind of radicalism, according to the Romanian literary scholar Ovid Crohmălniceanu, is the way the Romanian symbolists responded to Laforgue.<sup>74</sup> He is the source, for instance, of the ironic self-denial of Ion Minulescu and Adrian Maniu, both of whom contributed to *Simbolul*, though it may have been Eugen Iovanaki, expressing a peculiar sympathy for Laforgue, who first mediated the interest in the French writer to his friend Samuel Rosenstock. Several of Rosenstock's poems are characterized by the same indolent decadence and weariness as well as by a black humor recalling both Corbière and Laforgue and by the same kind of dramatic interruptions and even interpolated phrases in French like those in *În gropi fierbe viața rosie*.

In spite of the fact that the Romanian turn of the century is so explicitly directed toward French culture and literature, Ion Vinea is able to explain in 1924 that the Romanian avant-garde is an “export phenomenon” rather than one whose central ideas would be imported from outside.<sup>75</sup> Directly referring to Tristan Tzara's poems in their common journal *Chemarea*, Vinea says—somewhat exaggerating—that it was Tzara who started the literary process that separated the youth in France, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States from symbolism and that every “young” journal in these countries thereafter gives evidence to what was planned in Bucharest already before World War I and which thus must free the Romanian modernists from the accusation of only importing the new ideas.

If we don't mind the exaggeration, Vinea is undoubtedly on an interesting track. The question remains: what justifies his saying this?



**Aron Sigalu**

**BECOMES**

**ARTHUR SEGAL**

It is hard to believe, but the only time Hugo Ball mentions the name of Arthur Segal in his *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* is on 2 March 1916 when he relates that René Schickele, a writer and the editor of the journal *Die Weißen Blätter*, is planning an international exhibition in Zurich linked to the activities at the Meierei.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition is to focus on the artists Ludwig Meidner, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Arthur Segal, but Ball thinks that an all-German exhibition wouldn't make much sense, since it would be viewed as cultural propaganda. What is remarkable here is not Ball's political caution due to the ongoing war, but rather the fact that he at least, and therefore probably also Schickele, considered Arthur Segal to be a German artist, even though probably both of them knew that Segal, like Tristan Tzara and the Janco brothers, was born and grew up in Romania. Since 1892 Segal had lived mainly in Berlin or Munich and had been remarkably successful within the internationally important German art world. Evidently because of the outbreak of the war, in September 1914 he moved to Switzerland and the open-air paradise of Ascona, where Hans Arp was pleased to meet with him and whence he took him to Zurich and Cabaret Voltaire two years later.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Iași in Moldavia on 13 June 1875, Aron Sigalu, who took the name Arthur Segal as he was forced to emigrate to Germany at the age of seventeen, was the oldest of the dadaists in Zurich, ten years older even than Emmy Hennings and nine years older than Hugo Ball.<sup>3</sup> Like Samuel Rosenstock and the Iancu brothers, Aron Sigalu was born in a fairly if not extremely wealthy Jewish family, spending most of his childhood in the town of Botoșani some hundred kilometers northwest of Iași, almost totally dominated by Jewish culture and Jewish life, since his father Itzak or Israel Sigalu had opened a bank in Botoșani together with his brother, uncle Schaje Sigalu, and the latter's wife, aunt Amalia Sigalu. Botoșani was a small town with about 25,000 inhabitants of whom the majority was Jewish, most of them merchants and artisans. The town was also known for its rich cultural life, and it is hardly a coincidence that the national poet Mihai Eminescu, the composer George Enescu, and Nicolae Iorga were all born in or in the vicinity of Botoșani, with its Romanian and Armenian villas along the broad alleys also bordered by typical Jewish two-story houses with the living quarters upstairs above the shop, a few synagogues, and some of the most impressive landlord villas of the whole province. The bank manager Itzak Sigalu lived with his family in one of the Jewish houses on the main street, and hoped that his son Aron one day would be in charge of the prosperous bank. An entire fam-

ily, all the uncles and aunts and cousins, looked after young Aron Sigalu and his upbringing, characterized by local virtues, Jewish customs, and severe fulfillment of one's duties, while foreign ideas and the latest European cultural impulses were intermediated mainly by his grandmother in Iași, uncle Schaje, and aunt Amalia, whose daughter Regine had a complete mastery of German, French, and English and adored Goethe and Schiller without rejecting contemporary literature either. Aron Sigalu's private tutor, Mr. Süßman, admired both Jean Paul and Heinrich Heine, wrote poems in German telling of Jewish life and customs, and belonged to a circle of Talmudists, Hasidim, and cabalists gathering together at Schaje and Amalia Sigalu's place. Mr. Süßman is described as a great idealist, shabbily dressed but highly prized because he was considered to be a great expert on German literature. Aron Sigalu and he read together about Wilhelm Tell, Jean d'Arc, and Jean Paul.

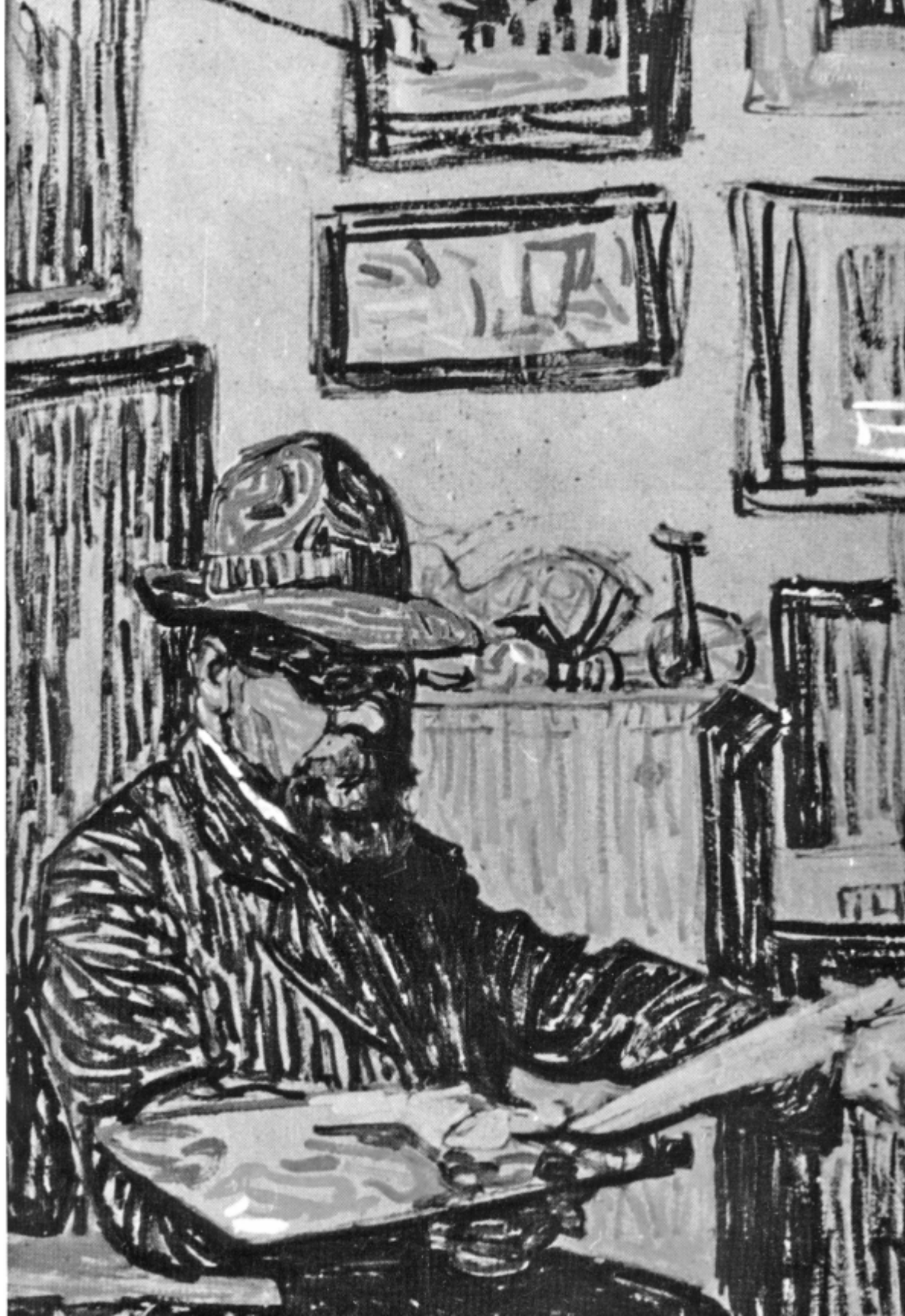
In other words, the conditions were exceptionally good for a bright career in banking, but Aron Sigalu became the black sheep of the family unusually fast and found himself in one conflict after another with both his parents and other members of the extended family. Young Sigalu hated his school, the teachers, and everything in the way of studies, felt that nobody understood him and that he was lonely and unjustly treated, and found joy and consolation only with his many animals, among others three dogs and more than one hundred pigeons. Arthur Segal himself, in an unpublished autobiography that he began in London in 1939, writes that he hated everything linked to forced duties and imposed tasks, especially when it came to the school, in which he also felt himself disregarded, disdained, and persecuted because of his Jewishness, which meant that anyone could say anything to him without consequences.<sup>4</sup> He tells also that he was a dreamer building up an inner world of his own in a town characterized by narrowness of outlook, stupidity, and petit bourgeois ignorance. People in the town, especially the Jews, are petty and prejudiced and understand only the average. Someone mentions that he has seen a coachman reading a newspaper. Can you imagine, a coachman reading a newspaper! And when one of Segal's uncles returns from a business trip to Paris and Berlin, people look up to him as if he is from another planet, while young Aron Sigalu, at that time only ten years of age, thinks that what the uncle has been impressed by is only stupid and childish. The Paris world's fair left the uncle totally unaffected, while the beer houses were most interesting in Berlin, where one could hear all the time: "Fräulein, bringen sie

FIGURE 8.1

Arthur Segal, self-portrait  
in the studio, 1910.

Editura Hasefer. Muzeul  
de Istorie al F.C.E.R.,

Bucharest.





**FIGURE 8.2**

Botoșani, postcard at the turn  
of the century.

mir ein Helles. Fräulein, bringen sie mir en Dunkles.” That was that and nothing more, and yet the uncle talked and talked to everybody and everywhere about how wonderful life had been abroad.

According to Arthur Segal, Aron Sigalu longed constantly and with all his heart to get away from this godforsaken hole, from the petty and sad life of Botoșani. He read one book after another, many books, all about foreign countries, their peoples, and their customs, and dreamed of going to Brazil to hunt buffaloes and to live a free life in the open. He read scores of short stories in journals to which his mother subscribed, most of them from Berlin. One of the journals was *Splinter*, a small, well-known and “modern” magazine whose editor was a man from Iași who called himself “Neuschatz de Jassy,” a man doing everything possible to introduce Romanian poetry to the German readers. Young Sigalu was enthusiastic and translated several of the short stories into Romanian while writing stories of his own, among others a story about a boy dreaming of becoming an artist against his parents’ will. The journal was enormously important and became an indispensable instrument for the intellectually hungry young man—until much later he discovered that the editorial office, two small and scandalously untidy rooms, was located in one of Berlin’s most shabby alleys in one of the most deteriorated districts of the city and that the world-famous editor from Iași was an alcoholic, chain-smoking ruffian.

When Aron Sigalu had reached the age of twelve, his parents sent him to a boarding school in Iași to improve his German in order to study economics and to work as an apprentice at a bank with which his father had important connections. Uncle Ignatz promised to take care of the boy; uncle Ignatz was considered the most educated in the family since he had studied in Leipzig. Now, in Iași, young Aron Sigalu for the first time came in contact with art when Adolf, a schoolmate who painted and wrote poetry, awakened his interest in drawing and painting, even though Adolf himself thought that “the meaning of painting” was nothing but making a “tasteful rubbish—that’s all.” The newly awakened interest was also inspired by Mr. Schulman at the department of bookkeeping at the bank in Botoșani, according to Segal an older gentleman who tried, in vain, to support his big family by means of an exceedingly small income and who understood quickly that the young boy was in fact unusually talented and needed support. Young Sigalu was supported also by his cousin Regine Sigalu, who herself made elegant drawings in charcoal, pedantically and extremely



FIGURE 8.3

Orthodox Romanian Jew with  
his son. Photo: Iosif Berman.  
Muzeul Țăranului Român,  
Bucharest.



elaborated. Never having seen an oil painting, Aron Sigalu bought the necessary equipment and walked out into the landscape with the palette in one hand, the canvas in the other, and the paint box on his back. With enormous expectations he walked proudly through the streets of Botoșani, people staring at him as if they saw a ghost. The question was simple and honest: how much money wouldn't he earn as a painter in the grand style? Uncle Schaje had returned from a business trip to Switzerland via Munich and had brought with him two reproductions of paintings by the world-famous artist Franz Deffreger exhibited at the Pinakothek in Munich, two paintings that the German state had brought for the prodigious sum of 50,000 marks. Fifty thousand marks! There must be money in painting, much money.

Like Tristan Tzara, Aron Sigalu had to leave Romania in connection with a scandal of which he himself, for the most part, was guilty and which affected also his family, though the scandal in Botoșani was of a totally different character from that in Bucharest some twenty years later. The disaster may have been foretold by an incident at the mayor's office of registration in Botoșani when the future marriage between cousin Ernestine and Edward Lobel, a private banker whom Arthur Segal describes as rough-mannered, untidy, and unclever but tremendously rich, was to be registered. Another cousin, cousin Fany, was to act as bridesmaid, and young Sigalu escorted her to the office together with the bride's father, uncle Schaje, who introduced the two youths to the mayor proudly saying: "You should know, they are both socialists." According to Segal, of course uncle Schaje didn't know what a socialist was, but wanted only to make himself and his family remarkable and self-important. Remembering the situation, Segal found it grotesque that somebody could be so ignorant and coarse as to present his own daughter and nephew as socialists to the mayor of a Romanian town at that time; but on the other hand, even though the mayor raised his eyebrows, he probably didn't know what kind of people those socialists were either.

As a pupil in the upper secondary school in Iași, Aron Sigalu had got in touch with the labor movement established in Botoșani and Iași in the 1880s through three of his schoolmates, of whom Petru Musoi later became the leader of the Romanian anarchist movement in Bucharest, while Alexandru Tzaran became the founder of a publishing company in Bucharest specializing in avant-garde literature which also



**FIGURE 8.4**

Nicolae Grigorescu, *Lodging House*

*in Orații*, undated. Muzeul Național

de Artă, Bucharest.

printed the leftist daily newspaper *Adevărul*. The third schoolmate was a boy called Zossin, the son of a farmer who later married a Jewish girl, which was something extraordinarily notable among both Christians and Jews at that time. Aron Sigalu was—apparently—also the only Jew in the socialist club founded by the friends and did not, according to himself, experience any anti-Semitism in the club; his ethical value and his self-respect were confirmed and he was encouraged to take responsibility for his own actions as well as the actions of others. The club, trying to inform the peasants and the workers about the new socialist ideas and ideals, attracted not only young men and women of the same age but also university students, especially when a branch for girls was established; the club rented two rooms with a porch, the larger room being used as a meeting room while Zossin lived in the smaller one. Arthur Segal remembered how at the age of sixteen he delivered a speech at the club about the hypocrisy of bourgeois marriage, a speech according to which marriage in capitalist society is nothing but “business” and prostitution, the bourgeoisie being terribly hypocritical and secretly devoting itself to one indecency after the other while nobody would openly talk about things like prostitution, divorce, adultery, or rape. According to Segal, the girls, all of them about fourteen or fifteen years old, were listening devoutly, admiring the lecturer’s unprecedented courage, a recollection confirmed by cousin Fany as well.

Of course, one day the club decided to organize a demonstration celebrating the first of May, the international workers’ day. Since it proved to be difficult to find a printer willing to print the manifesto of the club and the necessary posters urging all workers in all countries to unite, Aron Sigalu talked to uncle Leon, who had been thrown into a conflict with the editor of the local newspaper known for his chauvinistic and anti-Semitic opinions and who therefore—without knowing anything about the club and its leftist ideas—decided to sponsor the manifesto and the posters, including the paper, because he quickly realized that a political reaction was planned against the newspaper and its editor. No sooner said than done; the posters were put up on the most important walls of the town as fast as they were taken down by the police, who apparently had learned at least something about socialism. The scandal was a fact almost as soon as the demonstration had begun—Zossin, Musoi, and Tzaran were arrested while Aron Sigalu managed to flee to one of his uncles in the country.

The consequences of the failed demonstration were considered disastrous for the family: uncle Leon was dismissed from the bank and forced to move to Czernowitz, while uncle Schaje's proposal to send young Aron to Berlin was supported by both his parents and aunt Amalia. Aron's mother arranged with her sister's husband, uncle Sigmund living in Berlin, to take care of the young socialist and rebel against the prevailing social order at the same time as she was sending several of his drawings and paintings to the rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, who recommended private lessons in drawing and painting before entering the academy. Nevertheless, the parents were planning to put their son in a business school in Berlin to prepare him for an appointment at the bank in Botoșani as soon as the scandal had died away. Like most of the Jews in Romania, the family Sigalu was most probably "stateless," because, before the departure, Aron Sigalu first had to go to Iași where uncle Ignatz acquired an Austrian passport, meaning that Aron Sigalu officially became an Austrian subject.

Aron Sigalu arrived on 2 August 1892 at eight o'clock in the evening at the Friedrichstraße station in Berlin. Uncle Sigmund was prevented from meeting the seventeen-year-old youth from Botoșani, who picked up his luggage and took a cab to the hotel on Sebastianstraße where uncle Sigmund lived. Aron Sigalu's international career could begin.

Although the scandal in Botoșani meant that Aron Sigalu was sent as far from home as possible, his departure was scarcely against his own will, he who had been dreaming for so long of a magnificent artistic career in the big European metropolises and who already had shown exceptionally mature landscape studies and nature impressions from the neighborhoods surrounding Botoșani and Iași, studies in a light neo-impressionist style influenced by Nicolae Grigorescu, according to the Romanian art historian Amelia Pavel,<sup>5</sup> a delicate and richly nuanced artist highly esteemed in cultivated circles in Moldavia and considered the major domestic artist of the age. He may have been comparable only with Theodor Aman, rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Bucharest which Aman himself had founded in 1864, four years after the foundation of the similar academy in Iași. As mentioned before, Grigorescu introduced pleinairism in Romania, the dominating aesthetic in the late nineteenth century represented by, for instance, Ion Andreescu and leading artists in the next

generation, such as Ștefan Luchian, Gheorghe Petrașcu, Theodor Pallady, and the artist group *Cei patru* (the Four): Nicolae Tonitza, Francisc Șirato, Ștefan Dimitrescu, and Oscar Han. All of them had studied in either Munich or Paris, incomparably the most popular cities for Romanians studying abroad.

The circumstances around and the consequences of the scandal in Botoșani show clearly that the main reason for sending Aron Sigalu to Berlin instead of Munich or Paris was linked to family affairs; it is more or less evident that young Sigalu, dreaming of an artistic career, would have preferred Munich or Paris, but on the other hand he reveals in his autobiography that he looked forward to meeting with David Wasserman, one of his many cousins living in Berlin.<sup>6</sup> However, it was not long before he defied his parents and applied to the Academy of Fine Arts there, at which he studied in professor Eugen Bracht's class until he, like so many other Romanians, took the train to Paris to study at the Académie Julienne, only to travel to Munich one year later, where he stayed until 1904. Berlin of course was the capital of the German empire, but Munich attracted the international art life,<sup>7</sup> and it is not particularly surprising that, for instance, the young Spanish painter Pablo Ruiz—Picasso—got the advice in 1897 to study in Munich instead of Barcelona or Paris, in the same way as it was natural that both Wassily Kandinsky and Giorgio de Chirico were choosing Munich, not Paris or some other art metropolis; the fact that Kandinsky preferred the Slovenian Anton Ažbe's art school among all the other schools reveals also the reputation of both the school and the city within Eastern European art life. Compared to Munich Berlin was called a “cashier's desk of asphalt” totally lacking the charm of the Bavarian capital, including its reverentially decorated shop windows, its masterly painted images, its beautiful decorations, and its dangerous arms on the graves of the princes. Thomas Mann makes Munich sound like Bucharest when he says that the city glows with all its stylistic influences, like a gigantic masquerade of eclectic imitations, including both the classical columns of the Glyptothek and all kinds of buildings in Florentine Renaissance, neo-Gothic, and Jugendstil. As an art city Munich is not characterized so much by the confrontation between old and new, but rather by a more or less organic linkage between prevailing academicism and the emerging avant-garde, each taking advantage of the other and of the obvious cultural interest of the bourgeoisie. For instance, the academic painter Gabriel von Max was able to consciously break with the sacred rules of academicism, and it was he also who

indirectly took the initiative of founding the Secession carried out by Fritz von Uhde and Franz von Stuck in 1892; a remarkable number of professors at the academy took part in the foundation as well. Remarkable also is the fact that such an established artist and convinced Darwinist as von Max was attracted at the same time by everything from somnambulism, hypnosis, and spiritism to metaphysics and the interpretation of dreams, in short by things engaging the entire avant-garde and which were to be decisively important for Kandinsky's spiritual speculations as well.

Indeed, it was in Berlin, Paris, and Munich that Arthur Segal came to maturity as an internationally renowned artist, mostly known for his more or less impressionist studies of nature and his landscape paintings inspired by both the Italian mystic and symbolist Giovanni Segantini's "academic" pseudo-impressionism and Adolf Hölzel's "esoteric" theories of color.<sup>8</sup> Spending his summers in Moldavia, he was constantly informed of what was happening in Romania as well.<sup>9</sup> Like, for instance, Constantin Brâncuși, Arthur Segal too would soon promote international impulses, becoming an active part of the Romanian art world by his first solo exhibition in Sala Arta in Bucharest in 1910 and by taking part in Tinerimea's annual exhibitions. At the same time he became more and more active on the international scene, for instance by participating in exhibitions held by the Berlin Secession in 1907 and 1909 and by actively contributing to the foundation of the new Berlin Secession, including the new "expressionist youth," among others Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff. Segal had also had the time to marry, which probably was the immediate reason for his leaving Munich and moving to Berlin in 1904, the year he married Ernestine Charas,<sup>10</sup> a distant cousin from Botoșani whose parents had moved to Berlin in 1896 to escape the growing anti-Semitism in the small Moldavian country town and whose father is described as a skillful businessman "with no sense of business." At the beginning Ernestine Segal worked as private secretary of the director of one of Berlin's biggest electric companies, later as secretary of the new Secession.

It is perhaps equally characteristic of the "French" situation in Bucharest and of Arthur Segal's artistic attitude and approach that, despite the fact that he already around 1908 had been inspired by van Gogh and partly by German expressionism, at his first solo exhibition in Bucharest he chose to show more or less pointillist paintings dependent on Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, and Henri-Edmond Cross, paintings

highly praised by Romanian critics as belonging to the later phase of impressionism; the critics commended the paintings for their strong range of color and poetic light effects.<sup>11</sup> Therefore it may not be particularly surprising that the Tinerimea exhibition in April 1910 was subject to such heated polemics, despite the critic Theodor Cornel's words about "new guidelines in art."<sup>12</sup> According to Cornel, who had returned to Bucharest after eleven years in Paris, it is enough that artists discover "the essential and the general" in their surrounding world, that they extract from nature what is "general, durable and has character"; by personal transposition they endow it with a particular, unexpected vibration, unseen by the myopic eyes of the profane, a vibration that the profane do not understand and do not even care to understand. Among those exhibiting we find, for instance, along with Arthur Segal, the impressionists Jean Alexandru Steriadi and Ion Theodorescu, Cecilia Cutescu-Storck showing elegant Jugendstil-inspired paintings, and Constantin Brâncuși, the most provocative of them all. The polemics that followed Brâncuși's radically new works seem to be based on the fact that the critics and the public—at least indirectly—realized that Brâncuși had clearly broken with the impressionist aesthetic that had been his guiding star ever since his arrival in Paris in 1904, even though he was also strongly influenced by the Romanian peasant culture and its specific objects and artifacts, such as the woodworking of his own home district in the lower Carpathian Mountains between Transylvania and the Danube.<sup>13</sup> But these influences were not discovered—yet.

Obviously Arthur Segal was extremely successful during the years before he and his family moved to Ascona in September 1914. From his first solo exhibition through the move, he took part in almost thirty exhibitions in both Germany, Switzerland, and Hungary, in Berlin, Munich, Mannheim, Nuremberg, Frankfurt am Main, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Karlsruhe, Konstanz, Leipzig, Essen, Stuttgart, Münster, Basel, and Budapest, alongside, for instance, Max Pechstein, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Liebermann, Hans Arp, Oscar Lüthy, Paul Klee, Ardengo Soffici, Egon Adler, and Rudolf Hellwag.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile Segal's juvenile left-wing radicalism must have deepened and become more mature, at least to the extent that in April 1912 he was able to contribute to Franz Pfemfert's journal *Die Aktion*, founded in 1910, a kind of platform for mainly left-wing intellectuals, writers, and poets uniting the aesthetic avant-garde with more or less specifically political demands for a new social order. The periodical was



**FIGURE 8.5**

Arthur Segal, *Village Road*, 1910.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—

Preußischer Kulturbesitz,

Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



flooded by articles and essays claiming that, for instance, all churches must be dissolved and that there must be extreme promiscuity between the sexes; it is not impossible that Segal just before his departure to Switzerland read Hugo Ball's and Hans Leybold's joint poems in *Die Aktion*, published under the pseudonym Hu.Ha.Ba-ley, some of the most radical poems of the prewar period depicting more or less shabby nightclub environments, bohemians, dandies, prostitutes, and gangsters taking pleasure in being as shocking and blasé as possible.<sup>15</sup> Segal's contribution to *Die Aktion*<sup>16</sup> is much more cautious and guarded and begins with a slightly ironical description of the faster and faster development in contemporary art, a development meaning that the artist, as soon as he visits an opening, finds his own art outmoded despite his efforts to follow the latest trends. One style follows the other as swiftly as lightning. Gauguin and Matisse have long since been overcome. Cubism has hardly been taken seriously before futurism takes over. The youngest artists, looking for the newest sensations, fall upon futurism to bring home the game and show it to the surprised and terrified public. The hunt for the new has affected artists like a sickness, Segal says: the anguish of being "academic" has been transformed into an agony of death. Being academic has become humiliating, a proof of being devoid of talents, an insult. Every day new artists, every day new names. Nobody is at home any more, no legitimation can be found any more, everybody runs head over heels searching for the next trend, the next current, the next mode of expression. And the public, Segal asks, how shall the public react and relate? The art historians are too busy. How easily the artists are overestimated, misunderstood, underestimated. Only the most delicate and tactful observer or viewer is able to distinguish between the real talent and the bluff. Never have the movements followed each other as quickly as now. New associations, new societies, new currents, and new styles are born daily. However, Segal adds, contemporary times are also and at the same time characterized by unlimited possibilities. The new generation must be measured according to other standards than before, must be looked upon by new, unbound eyes. According to Segal, Kandinsky's new pure, abstract and spiritual painting with its seemingly gratuitous conglomeration of houses, people, colors, and other things is an ultimate consequence of the efforts of futurism to represent the real, the literal, not the object *an sich* but as a part of the whole, the general. Kandinsky's art can even be described as social, contrary to purely spiritual or purely decorative art. Kandinsky shows a harmonious wholeness of all

the shattered parts of our world and reality. The shattered parts of a town, a city, the mountains, the lakes, the woods, the stars, the sun, and the moon, all are built into a harmonious structure: the universe!

Indeed, Segal ends his essay: “We live in an interesting, animated time.”

Arthur Segal’s wife Ernestine Segal suggests in an autobiographical note in 1964<sup>17</sup> that her husband’s apparently sudden decision to move to Ascona in 1914 was because of his health, though it is difficult to exclude the fact that war had broken out in August and that Arthur Segal probably was still an Austrian subject and therefore ran the risk of being mobilized. In any case, like so many other refugees in war-ravaged Europe, he chose Switzerland. His wife writes—with references to her husband’s health—that she encouraged him to leave Germany as soon as possible while she herself stayed to take care of the children, following him to Ascona as soon as she had let their furnished apartment in Berlin to a German diplomat, who had been stationed before the war in Bulgaria. The reason for leaving Germany in such a hurry may be a combination of some kind of illness that needed to be treated and the fact that both Germany and Austria were at war: at a German hospital Arthur Segal would certainly have had to show his passport, which most probably was forged.

It is not impossible that it was Hans Arp who enticed Segal to Ascona, unless Karl and Gusto Gräser’s open-air center Monte Verità at Lago Maggiore had the necessary power of attraction by itself thanks to its international reputation especially among artists, writers, and other intellectuals engaged in metaphysical and esoteric matters, which also attracted Arthur Segal. Hans Arp was a founding member of the artist group Die Moderne Bund in Weggis in Switzerland in 1911 and may have met Segal one year later when the group exhibited at the Sturm gallery in Berlin, an exhibition in which Segal took part as well.<sup>18</sup> In any case, Arp was soon a frequent visitor at Segal’s house Casa all’Angelo on the slopes of the Collina mountain in Ascona, together with, for instance, the writers Emil Ludwig, Leonhard Frank, Werner von Schulenberg, Waldemar Jollos, and Heinrich Goesch, and the artists Marianne Werekkin, Alexej Jawlensky, and Otto and Adya van Rees; later Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, and Viking Eggeling joined the illustrious company as well.<sup>19</sup>

Ernestine Segal describes the Gräser’s center, at that time very famous and characterized by its theosophical direction, vegetarianism, nudist culture, and

political anarchism, as a true paradise, an oasis for hopeful defectors who together formed a curious community of idealists from all over the world: anarchists, pacifists, theosophists, vegetarians, fanatics, artists, politicians, and hopelessly lost dreamers, of whom many gathered together at the Segal house to discuss, read poetry, and solve all the problems of the world. To talk about material matters was forbidden, money was considered the worst scourge of mankind, and it was also impossible to earn money in Ascona, though one could obtain valuable experiences, since there was plenty of time to contemplate and dream. Mrs. Segal tells, for instance, of how a writer and his wife, a singer at the opera, are able to live without any income on vegetables only, which they grow in their own garden, and how his wife, suffering from toothache, must visit the dentist in Locarno and pays for the treatment by singing an aria.

According to Ernestine Segal, Ascona was a “spirited place with a very special atmosphere.” For instance, Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman performed “modern” dances, numerous evenings with lectures and recitations were arranged, endless discussions were held about contemporary art and philosophy—there was always something to do in Ascona, and the war seemed very distant indeed. The company was extremely animated, but no one was allowed to visit Casa all’Angelo between nine and twelve in the morning, since Ernestine Segal had to spend her time teaching the two children, both of school age; the school in Ascona was not to be contemplated because of its low level of instruction. Like so many wives of intellectuals, she had also taken it upon herself to type out her husband’s manuscripts, since for the moment he didn’t paint but devoted himself to philosophical and religious matters, unless he was teaching painting for purely economic reasons.

One day the financial situation was made essentially easier by an unexpected visit. An older gentleman stepped into the silent house and offered the famous artist Arthur Segal a monthly allowance, of his own free will and without any obligations; the writer Leonhard Frank had informed “Pelz-Mayer,” the German furrier Bernhard Mayer in Zurich, about Segal’s difficulties.

The distance of time since the events in Switzerland may be the reason for the obviously distant and even disengaged tone of Ernestine Segal’s notes written in 1964, notes, for the most part, dealing with everyday matters such as the household, the

children, and the friends. At the time of the Dada activities in Zurich Ernestine Segal was, like so many other wives of artists and writers, a housewife responsible for the “ground services” when not doing needlework or taking care of the garden, something which also prevented her from taking part in the more spectacular events in Ascona or Zurich. Thus, her description of the activities at the Meierei as well as other Dada events in Zurich seems unusually cold and detached, as if it was meant for a popular handbook published much later, while she herself admits that she was totally uninterested in “this kind of artistic problem.”<sup>20</sup> Dutifully she renders the legend of the word Dada being randomly picked up in a dictionary, at the same time as she defines the Dada group as a “peculiar circle” gathering together at a café in Zurich for endless discussions meant to shock the bourgeoisie. The intonation is equally distanced when she tells—obviously without knowing what it was about—that the dadaists published their own magazines and designed a poster for a performance, a great sensation in Zurich: the dadaists let the maddest things happen, turned everything upside-down, and not until later did the audience learn to handle such demonstrations. Ernestine Segal doesn’t mention the fact that it must have been Hans Arp who took her and her husband to the Meierei on 5 February 1916, even though Arp demonstrably was one of those who together with Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings was responsible for the preparations and the preliminary arrangements and who for that reason must have informed at least Arthur Segal about the imminent evening, since the organizers wished that as many artists and others interested as possible would take part in the event. Furthermore, one didn’t travel from Ascona to Zurich without a reason, especially if money was short. However, Ernestine Segal suggests that she and her husband took part in the first Dada event by chance, an event that ended in riots and insurrection. According to her, the artists on the stage turned their jackets the wrong way round and read their own poems while beating pots, saucepans, buckets, and other sheet metal things, thus making a horrible noise, totally incomprehensible—a total chaos.

Ernestine Segal’s description is the more remarkable as she nowhere mentions that her husband, in fact already for that first evening, contributed some woodcuts to be hung on the wall along with works by, for instance, Hans Arp, Giacometti, Otto van Rees, Marcel Slodki,<sup>21</sup> and his countryman Marcel Janco.<sup>22</sup> Nor does she mention that Arthur Segal exhibited at the Meierei in June together with, for instance, Hans Arp,

Paolo Buzzi, Francesco Cangiullo, Marinetti, Modigliani, Picasso, Otto van Rees, and once again his compatriot Janco.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, she doesn't say that her husband contributed to *Cabaret Voltaire* either, or that he took part in the big Dada exhibition at Salon Wolfsberg in the same year, only that he was asked to send some woodcuts to "their periodical" and that he thought it was "very funny." In fact, Arthur Segal took part also in the first Sturm exhibition at Galerie Dada on Bahnhofstraße in March-May 1917 along with, for instance, Fritz Baumann, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, Walter Helbig, and Marcel Janco,<sup>24</sup> and it would be remarkable if he didn't take part in the first Sturm soirée by which the gallery was officially opened at the end of March and at which Sophie Taeuber performed "abstract dances," Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and Frédéric Clouser read their own poems, while Janco designed the masks for the performances.<sup>25</sup> One year later Arthur Segal contributed to the third Dada anthology as well, published in December and edited by his countryman Tristan Tzara, at the same time as he participated, together with, for instance, Arp, Slodki, and Walter Helbig, in the exhibition at Salon Wolfsberg celebrating the publication of the anthology. Still one year later, in 1919, he contributed to the *Der Zeltweg* anthology and participated in the Dada exhibition once more arranged at Wolfsberg.<sup>26</sup> In the same year—from January to February—Segal had a one-man show at Wolfsberg while intensifying his engagement in the activities around *Das Neue Leben*, in whose first exhibition at the Basler Kunstverein he also participated, and around the Radikale Künstler group as well, probably through Marcel Janco.

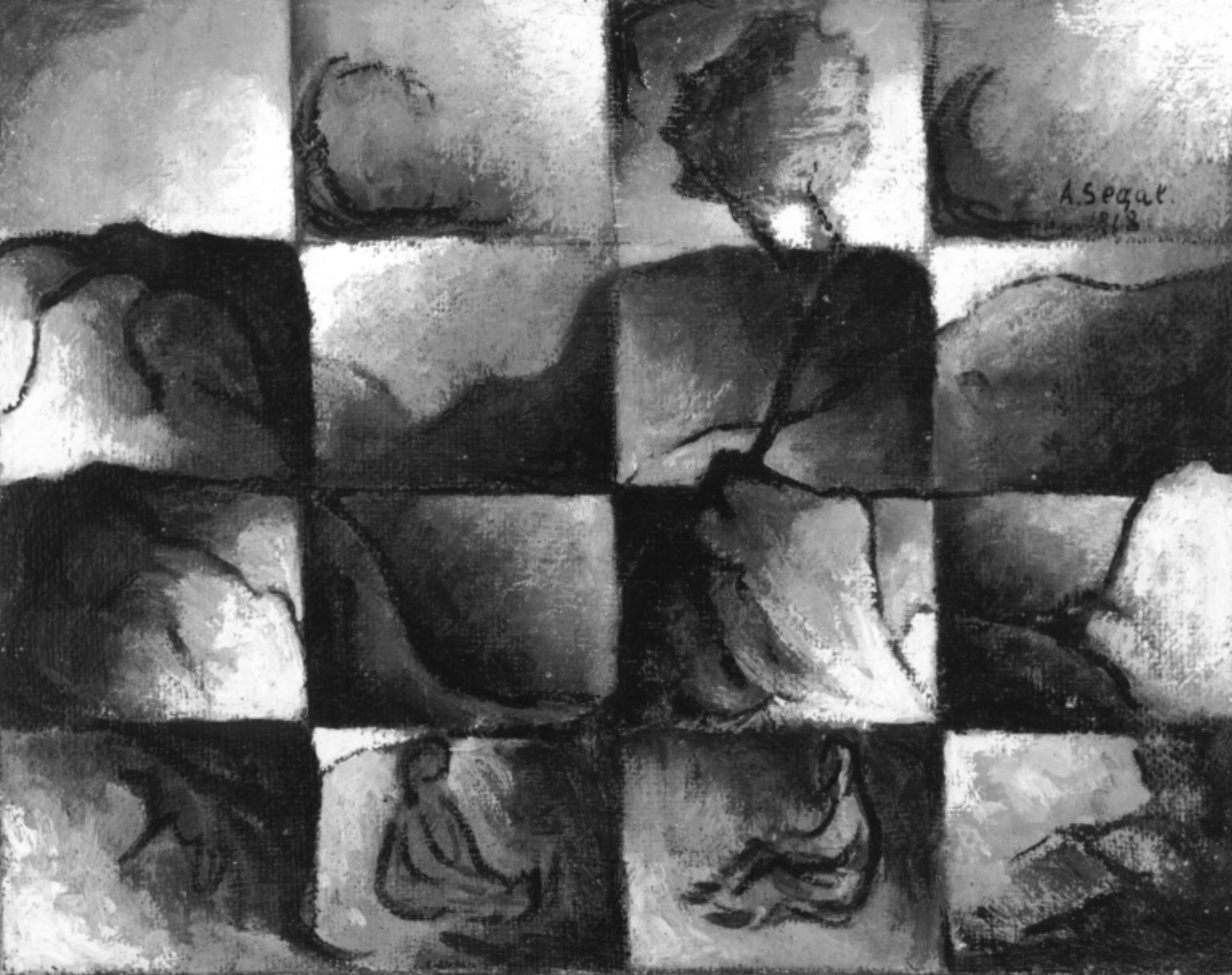
In other words, Arthur Segal's engagement in the Dada activities was much more fundamental, profound, and extensive than his wife wished to remember or intimate, though still less than the periodically most hectic participation of the other dadaists; Arthur Segal never wrote any manifesto, and as far as is known he never stood on the stage of the Meierei or elsewhere. However, despite this, one can hardly say that he thought those activities only "very funny" and nothing more. When Ernestine Segal states that her husband had begun to devote himself to philosophical and religious matters and that she herself typed his manuscripts, it sounds too close to what could be characterized as the ideo-historical or ideological foundation of Dada to be only a coincidence. The background of Segal's reflections upon what he himself calls the "equivalence"—*Gleichwärtigkeit*—seems to be linked to the other dadaists' protests

against the madness of the war as well. According to the Romanian art historian Pavel Liska, Arthur Segal was shocked by the barbarism of the war, temporarily losing his confidence in art and devoting himself instead to philosophical and religious questions to find a substitute for the lost system of values,<sup>27</sup> which can also be linked to the efforts of the dadaists to reevaluate all values. In 1915 he writes “Jehovah and the Tragedy of Expression” and a “Diary of a Weak Man,” two manuscripts never published, of which the latter contains the first attempts at his theory of the “equivalence.” This is a theory culminating in 1916–1917, at the time when Segal’s engagement in the Dada movement was deepest, and according to which even the most trivial things are worth expressing artistically, because there is no inner hierarchy between different phenomena in reality. Segal doesn’t deny his political interest in expanding the theory beyond painting to the equality of individuals based on the mutual position of things and beings in the universe, which, according to Liska, can also be linked to his handling of both the actual conflicts of the war and his own psychic problems in his youth. Power and the powerful, powerlessness and weakness, as well as their mutual relations form the fundamental set of problems in Segal’s ethical “creed”:

*You are weak.  
Alas, strength,  
you cannot deny  
the weakness.  
Constantly you deny  
the weakness of the strong,  
he who cannot deny  
his weakness.  
And reborn the strength  
of the weak  
appears.  
Therefore you are weak.  
Alas, strength,  
therefore the weakness  
is strong too.<sup>28</sup>*

Segal begins the fictitious “diary” by stating that he himself is a “milksop,” then allows his reflections on the relationship between strength and weakness to advance until the moment when he turns the whole set of problems upside-down. The inherited scale of values regarding recognized virtues like strength, work, achievement, enterprise, and ability to hold one’s own is fundamentally called in question: the genius doesn’t stand higher than the dilettante, the master higher than the apprentice, the artist higher than the cleaning woman; in fact, the weak is stronger than the strong. “Art is treachery,” the kitsch cannot be separated from the masterpiece. According to Liska, this is no manifesto of anti-art, but rather a matter of considering art as equal to other human activities on the same level as everything else. It is no coincidence either that the disbelief in the contemporary bourgeois concept of value makes Segal reflect upon explicitly religious questions, since he advocates the notion of everybody’s equality before God, the equality of every creature and every single thing in the world. Segal doesn’t recognize the power of church, state, or any other institution, nor the seeming powerlessness or unimportance of the individual either. At the same time the principle of equality in art is identical with God: according to Segal, there are only three art directions or currents, three ways leading to the goal: the way to God, the way to the absolute, and the way to equality—religion in art. The goal is the divine reconciliation, the unity of man and God.

Arthur Segal wouldn’t be the artist Arthur Segal if he hadn’t put his theory into artistic practice as well. In a lecture at Wolfsberg in January 1919 he compares his own way of composing his paintings with both primitive art and the reliefs of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, as well as with the way children treat the different things in the image equally without creating hierarchies tied to a central perspective.<sup>29</sup> Segal refers to a previous lecturer who has talked about miniatures and explains that everything small, insignificant, and subordinated is the miniature of life. You pass the small without seeing it, because the big forces its way. Our eyes and our ability to perceive things don’t always recognize the small things in the world. Thus, what is small and weak is pushed aside, forgotten, and even despised. One doesn’t value the small, everything aims at the big, so easy to see. But for those who don’t value the penny, the pound is worthless too. As in Egyptian art, all elements are equally important in an equal mutual relationship with each other. This is the case in Segal’s own art as well: the painted image is decentralized and the gaze



**FIGURE 8.6**

Arthur Segal, *Adam and Eve*, 1918. Norton

Simon Museum, The Blue Four Galka

Scheyer Collection 1953, Los Angeles.



must read the different elements equally. Even the frame has another meaning than in traditional art, since it transcends the image without “framing” it. In traditionally centralized compositions the frame demarcates the image from the surrounding world in the same way as the state by the help of its borders defines itself against other states. Segal says that his own art is aiming at elevating the penny instead of the pound. The pound is made of pennies, and if you take away one single penny, the pound is no longer a pound. According to Segal, the treatment of light in his own paintings serves to spread the light equally all over the image from black to white: this light is the ardent light coming from every single thing and being in reality, “the inner seeing, the religious seeing, the seeing coming from God. And in the eyes of God everything is equal. In God’s eyes the small is big and the big small.”<sup>30</sup>

When the war had ended, new problems came up, Ernestine Segal writes.<sup>31</sup> What would they do? Where would they go? According to her, it was impossible to stay in Ascona. Although her husband was exhibiting in Zurich, Basel, and elsewhere, the Segal family couldn’t be dependent on others’ charity for ever.

After having considered the possibility of opening an art school of their own, the couple decided to return to Berlin, still supported by “Pelz-Mayer.” A new chapter was written, only partly connected to Dada, only partly connected to Romania, but a new chapter still.



Symbolists,  
**ABSURDISTS,**  
*and* **Futurists**

The major and most important mouthpiece of the mature Romanian avant-garde was the magazine *Contimporanul*, published between 1922 and 1932. Bearing in mind the radical attitude of the periodical, the contributors' attacks on symbolism were not unexpected, despite the fact that symbolism was or rather had been the most "modern" mode of expression at the turn of the century and thus also the most radical current in Romanian literature, in direct confrontation with the literary and cultural establishment, characterized by its nationalism and anti-Semitism. Now, in the third decade of the new century, symbolism was experienced as both antiquated and at the same time worth defending, in spite of everything, against, for instance, Benjamin Fundoianu, who had claimed that symbolism was dead and buried once and for all. Thus, Horia Verzeanu, for instance, could explain that symbolism had become decadent (the term "decadence" itself was known in Romania from political history and literature, defined by Gourmont as imitation) but must be respected for having reconciled the differences between the trivial, the everyday life, and metaphysics. Symbolism also cultivated free verse, which, according to Verzeanu, corresponds better to "the inner rhythm of life and the human soul" than classical, metrical poetry.<sup>1</sup>

After all, it is not particularly surprising that the inaugural issues of *Contimporanul* gave so much attention to the pros and cons of symbolism, since this had been the nursery of large parts if not of the entire Romanian avant-garde, the foundation stone on which the vanguard modes of expression had been built. Two of the editors—Marcel Iancu and Ion Vinea—had also been responsible for the founding of *Simbolul*, to which Romania's best-known symbolists had contributed and whose name clearly declared its affiliation with the symbolist movement, even though Vinea in particular would try to emancipate himself from the symbolist deadweight in both *Chemarea* and the journal *Nouă revista română*, as did Tristan Tzara as well. For this reason it is no coincidence either that the Romanian literary scholar Dan Grigorescu refers to *Simbolul* when describing the cultural atmosphere of Romania during the years just before the war,<sup>2</sup> an atmosphere undoubtedly containing elements celebrating vanguard attitudes; Vinea's, Iancu's, and Tzara's insurrection was, for the most part, the result of protests that generations of symbolists had formulated and directed against traditional literature and art dependent on foreign models. Hadn't the "symbolist" Adrian Maniu, contributing to both *Simbolul* and Ion Minulescu's short-lived journal

*Insula* in the same year, explained that beauty is for the masses, that music helps to digest the food, that literature is an excellent sleeping drug, that the moon is a cut-off breast, and that artistic fantasy is equal to masturbating with ideals?<sup>3</sup> And doesn't Serge Fauchereau say that one can imagine Tzara's first poem in *Simbolul* as a symbolist pastiche?

One of the writers who must have had a decisive impact on young Samuel Rosenstock, thus arousing his interest in poets like Maeterlinck, Verhaeren, Corbière, and Laforgue in addition to Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Verlaine, was Alexandru Macedonski, the most prominent figure of symbolism by the end of the nineteenth century, of whom it has been said that he introduced modernist literature in Romania while Mihai Eminescu was still publishing poetry influenced by Enlightenment ideas and romanticism.<sup>4</sup> Born in 1854 into a wealthy boyar family ruled by the father—General Alexandru D. Macedonski—with an iron hand, Macedonski grew up to become one of the best-known and eccentric bohemians in Bucharest, quickly acquiring numerous antagonists and enemies among the intellectual elite of the time until he moved on to Paris at the age of twenty. From here he spread the rumor back to Bucharest that he would start a French journal of his own that would make him famous all over Europe, at the same time as he industriously associated with French intellectuals and artists, contributed to journals like *Élan littéraire* and *Bulletin de l'Académie Santone*, and gave extravagant receptions for all those who longed to listen to the famous Romanian poet reading his own poems to a cup of Turkish coffee or Turkish sweets. Home in Bucharest he was almost immediately arrested in March 1875 and was sentenced to prison for criticizing Prince Carol; after three months he was released thanks to twenty liberal lawyers who had defended him in court. Paradoxically enough but typical of Romanian absurdism, almost immediately after the release he was appointed superintendent of Romania's historical monuments and given the prestigious Bene-Merenți medal.

Macedonski, who made his debut with the collection *Prima verba* at the age of eighteen, proclaimed in 1880 that the new poetry must start out from the conviction that the logic of poetry, contrary to the logic of prose, is illogical and that everything which is not logical is in fact poetry, that absurdity itself is the foremost distinctive feature and guiding star of poetry. This conception would also permeate Macedonski's

FIGURE 9.1

Alexandru Macedonski.

Academia Română, Bucharest.



journal *Literatorul*, which continued to influence Romanian literary life right up to the author's death in 1920 and in which Macedonski published, for instance, the essay "Poezia viitorului" in 1892 describing and proclaiming the poetry of the future, later defined as the first real manifesto of Romanian symbolism. According to the essay, like Wagnerianism, symbolism linked to "instrumentalism" is "the last word of the human genius." Macedonski's point of departure is the literary symbol interpreted as a hieroglyph, an image giving birth to the conceptual idea; according to Macedonski, the symbol is "eternal and universal" in its capacity as both an artistic mode of expression and a pure and unspoiled means of knowledge. Familiar with the latest development in French symbolism, Macedonski declared that modern poetry must express the unspeakable, the unexpressed, "the musicality and colors of the graphic signs," at the same time pointing to the supreme right of the poet to blend the ugly with the beautiful. He also boasted that he was the first poet in Europe to use free verse, which he himself called "symphonic" or "Wagnerian" poems in which he also used colored writing, thus putting into poetic and printing practice Baudelaire's correspondences and the suggestions of Rimbaud's *Voyelles*. At the beginning of the twentieth century he wrote not only a set of visual poems but even a "visual book," a saga whose text was written in different colors of ink, red, green, blue, black, and silver, on pages of different colors.<sup>5</sup>

One must proceed from the sublime through the trivial and the other way round, Macedonski declared, sitting on his ingeniously decorated throne in his literary salon at home on Calea Dorobanților, when not keeping court at Café Fialovski, Café Boulevard, or Café Kübler. At the latter he sat at his regular table heckling the samanatorists sitting under the big mirror just opposite, the head waiter delivering his mail and the newspapers of the day while the poet himself saluted his worst enemies, talked about Sar Péladan's lecture at the Ateneul, and read through the latest works by some of his devoted disciples. The great, gigantic genius of the company was—of course—nobody else than Alexandru Macedonski, often referring to both Lord Byron and Goethe, whom everybody was allowed to compare to Macedonski. In the salon at home he was dressed like a Masonic master in one eccentric costume after another surrounded by heavy draperies and candles, constantly chain-smoking, constantly talking, constantly teaching his adepts while his wife Ana Macedonski served tea or Turkish coffee, occasionally wine and beer as well. The salon, which

met for the first time on 10 May 1892, came together every Sunday evening and was furnished in a style reminiscent of the Rosicrucians' similar salons in Paris and elsewhere. The disciples, among them Adrian Maniu, Tudor Arghezi, George Bacovia, Ion Pillat, and Tudor Vianu, were sitting on ten chairs in a circle around the master's throne reading their own poems, which Macedonski "reviewed." Ștefan Petică, one of the disciples or adepts, awarded rings decorated with precious stones, false of course, and compared Macedonski to the pied piper of Hameln, who with his enchanted flute enticed the children from the country to follow him along underground passages up to the sunny meadows. Macedonski himself explained that his own aestheticism was "the haute école of emotions, where you love the treasures, long for the unfamiliar, and learn to understand the passion for the new"—and proclaimed, inspired by Nietzsche's superman, the detestation of the trivial.

In an environment dominated by Eminescu's traditionalism hostile to anything "modern" that could corrupt the original "Romanian" soul, Macedonski fought like a Don Quixote for the modernist ideas, which, according to the Romanian literary scholar Petre Răileanu, means that metaliterary elements took over literature.<sup>6</sup> According to Eva Behring, Macedonski transformed his own neurosis and his feeling of spleen, in his poems, novellas, and dramas as well as in his novel *Le Calvaire de feu*, published in Paris in 1906, into sensational and macabre visions full of absurd figures and madness-stricken heroes, a sort of manifold alter egos of a bizarre and extremely vulnerable psyche.<sup>7</sup> The result was a passionately gesticulating poetry characterized by eccentric allegories, absurd combinations of images, neologisms, "barbarisms," refrains, and linguistic repetitions, poems that made him the foremost representative of the new poetry in Romania at the turn of the century and some of which were also published in Marinetti's pre-futurist magazine *Poesia* in 1899, a fact that shows their contemporary qualities both nationally and internationally. Structurally a romanticist, Macedonski transcends romantic poetry, though according to Dumitru Micu he cannot yet be defined as a modernist but rather as a premodernist clearly portending the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> In the poem "Noapte de mai," for instance, which also unmistakably forebodes S. Samyro's poetical reflections upon the mystery of the night, the solution for neurotic pain is to merge into nature and the universe, a feeling reminiscent also of the one expressed in the poem "Excelsior":

*In the light of the full moon  
When descending  
The roofs are flooded  
With light.*

*The night shimmering in blue  
Is a rain of silver  
A dream of beautiful poetry,  
Songs and whispers.*

...

*Alas! sky, nature,  
Alas! Lord, blue mystery,  
You raised me above the disaster,  
And the curse, and the hatred.<sup>9</sup>*

As an antithesis, following the discrepancy between the ideals and reality, Macedonski completes his tragic fate in the poem “Noapte de decembrie” in the collection of poems *Flori sacre* (1912), in which he dreams of transforming into an emir dying in the desert on his way to Mecca. But he may also let his poems be traversed by a peculiar ironical humor:

*One dies, another is born, one weeps  
But the long and eternal parade of humankind  
Goes in circles around the same and always same goal:  
To live a good life!*

*Despite the flow of centuries and all wisdom  
The animal is the master of the soul, as the first day.  
We listen always to the grand words: “Our native country and freedom!”  
Quilt and pillow!<sup>10</sup>*



In 1908 a number of young fans of Macedonski started the magazine *Revista celorlalți*,<sup>11</sup> whose title means “the journal of the others.” Of course the founders of the magazine published a manifesto in the inaugural issue, according to which “some youths speaking and reading Romanian like others” now wished to write differently than others, violently protesting against the dominant folkloristic and ethno-nationalist literature, against both samanism and poporanism, and especially against Nicolae Iorga’s bombastic chauvinism. On the whole, urban environments were put against rural ones; for instance, Ovid Densusianu had asked himself in 1905 why true Romanian culture must be found in the countryside only. Don’t we have a city life too, is there nothing in the cities worth depicting and expressing? Hardly, answered the circle behind the short-lived journal *Insula* in 1912 who defined themselves as living on an island and found the impudent, insolent continental noise repugnant and detestable. Contemporary writers and intellectuals, as well as “ordinary” readers, were shocked as much by the others’ disillusioned, sarcastic, and bizarre way of handling lyrical motifs with the help of, for instance, intertwined sounds, colors, and scents, as by their choice of subject matter, where the city parks, the streets, and the buildings are inhabited by prostitutes, criminals, the insane, and erotomaniacs and where hospitals, restaurants, cathedrals, and palaces play a prominent role as “scenes of the crime.” Everything anguished, neurotic, macabre, bizarre, exotic, unusual, theatrical, grotesque, elegiac, light-hearted, sensuous, dripping, and monotonous was celebrated as well as everything trivial, everyday, tedious, and empty, at the same time as the poets were borrowing freely from world literature, blending images and metaphors, motifs, and atmospheres. The poetical world is cluttered with big, proud, tall ships, frigates and galleys, tropical islands, mountains shrouded in mist, ice-cold fjords, Arctic snow-covered plains, exotic coasts, leafless trees in city parks, rainy landscapes, smoky beer halls, and shabby inns. The luxurious salons and drawing rooms are full of flowers and pieces of jewelry, precious metals, and exotic birds; at the same time the city itself may appear as both banal and hopeless, as in Ion Minulescu,<sup>12</sup> the darling of the symbolist bohemians and, according to the magazine *Integral* in 1925, as important for Romanian poetry as Guillaume Apollinaire for French.<sup>13</sup> According to Dumitru Micu, Minulescu blends Baudelaire’s taste for the bizarre with Maeterlinck’s taste for the mystical, Verlaine’s ingenuity with Laforgue’s self-irony, thus producing a peculiar poetic sound recalling Verhaeren’s “decadent”

poems, a sound distantly sounding in Edgar Allan Poe as well. Having made his debut with poems celebrating Eminescu, to the extent that Minulescu could almost be characterized as an imitator of the famous poet, he develops a lyrical, witty, and humorous style which, according to Micu, draws near for instance to Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Prévert, and Apollinaire.<sup>14</sup> Art must create something new in any case, always and everywhere, Minulescu declared in his manifesto “Aprindeți torțele” published in *Revista celorlalți* in March 1908; art must oppose every kind of traditional inertia and poetic inactivity: light the torches, go to the barricades, fight for the new poetry! According to Minulescu, the new poets demolish in order to dream up a new art: they have no love for the past—love they reserve for the future. The seminal principles of this new art are freedom and individuality, the abandonment of forms learned from the old masters, the tendency toward what is new, odd, bizarre.<sup>15</sup>

Like so many other Romanian poets and intellectuals, the nineteen-year-old Ion Minulescu had made the obligatory trip to Paris in 1900, where he stayed until 1905. Camouflaged as a student of the *École de Droit*, the extremely well-dressed dandy visited Café de l’Odéon and Café Voltaire, Cabaret d’Aristide Bruant, La Lune Rousse, Moulin de la Galette, and Moulin Rouge, read Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Corbière, Verhaeren, and Maeterlinck, and wrote his first symbolist “chansonnets.” Once home in Bucharest Minulescu immediately visited Café Kübler, sitting at the table of the modernists while the traditionalists sat at the table just opposite. At the same time he took part in the discussions at the literary club of the magazine *Viața nouă*, which met every Saturday at the restaurant *Mircea*, worked as proofreader at the newspaper *Patriotul*, and was soon appointed columnist at *Viitorul* at the same time as he joined the circle of the dramatist Ion Luca Caragiale. Despite failing finances Minulescu succeeded in living at Hotel Imperial above the Kübler in a small apartment in which he also edited *Revista celorlalți* while appearing as the dandy par excellence of Romanian literary life, dressed in English scarves and shirts with his own monogram; at the cafés he gave off a smell of Guerlain’s most expensive perfumes as he delivered one witticism after another and transformed his regular table at Café Kübler, Terasa Oteleseanu, and Casa Capșa into a court pronouncing sentences on the entire humankind for all its crimes against art and literature.



**FIGURE 9.2**

Iosif Iser, Ion Minulescu (in the middle) at Terasa Oteleseanu at the turn of the century. Muzeul Literaturii Române, Bucharest.

Minulescu's collection *Romanțe pentru mai târziu* with which he made his debut in 1908, with a cover drawing by Iosif Iser, is a free verse parody on the sentimental-melancholic romance and at the same time one of the most violent attacks of the age against the romantic ideal of the poet, which, as in the collection *De vorbă cu mine însumi* in 1913, illustrated by Iser as well, ends up with a scattered self-image full of contradictions, strongly reminiscent of the "self-portrait" Tristan Tzara gives some ten years later in both his Dada manifesto of 1918 and the antiphilosopher Aa's manifesto of 1920.<sup>16</sup> Minulescu describes himself as a peculiar and strange man, insane, shouting in anger and devotion, a crossing of harps and trumpets and lazy baboons, a jesting image of silent remorse, arrogant and roaring with laughter like clamoring mandolins.<sup>17</sup> He consciously developed a bohemian lifestyle and became a *causeur* with unexpected ideas and whims, at the same time cultivating an exclusive taste for modern art, modern culture, and modern luxury, a provocateur loading his poems with neologisms and exotic words consciously meant to irritate those who have rocked themselves to sleep with romantic elegies and viscous, tastefully chased metaphors. Especially his humor seems to make it hard to define him unambiguously as a typical symbolist: Minulescu loves to scatter provocative and shocking statements calling forth liberating laughter and gladly uses everyday phrases and the most trivial expressions. Like Laforgue, he satirically employs one "elevated" motif after the other like, for instance, his own death in *Romanțe pentru mai târziu*:

*The caretaker locked my tomb  
 And I stayed outside in the rain . . .  
 The caretaker locked my tomb  
 And I was left behind to take my skeleton for a walk  
 Under wet willows,  
 Whispering  
 Bending down  
 To kiss the black void floating in my eyeballs  
 To kiss my white forehead—  
 The one who knew the secret  
 Of my madness—  
 And to wipe my feet dry . . .*<sup>18</sup>

The melancholic tone, also present in Samuel Rosenstock's early poems, is characteristic of Minulescu's lyrically rolling, sad-sounding love poems, of which, for instance, the "song without music" in *Romanțe pentru mai târziu* plays on the same strings as young Rosenstock tries to make vibrate as well:

*Tonight when we meet—  
For, I believe, the night will come—  
Tonight I will light three silver chandeliers  
And read for you  
The chapters from the epos  
Of the lovers from Syracuse,  
Cithera,  
Lesbos,  
And Corinth.  
And tonight when we meet  
I will ask you,  
As I have asked so many before:  
—Would you like to be mine or would you not?*

...

*And tonight when we part—  
For, I believe, the night will come—  
We blow out the blue flames of the silver chandeliers,  
And press the roses  
Between the pages of the pink epos  
Of the lovers from Syracuse,  
Cithera,  
Lesbos,  
And Corinth.  
And tonight when we part—  
I will ask you,  
As I have advised so many before:  
Remember, you were mine as well!<sup>19</sup>*

It is obvious that young Rosenstock was dependent on Ion Minulescu, and thus the Romanian literary scholar Mircea Scarlat, referring to S. Samyro's poems "Cântec," "Poveste," and "Dans de fée" in *Simbolul*, may—certainly somewhat exaggerating—declare that Samuel Rosenstock was simply an imitator of Minulescu without literary images or metaphors of his own. At the same time Scarlat hears echoes in Rosenstock's early poems of other modes of expression in Romanian symbolism, for instance poetical expressions of Macedonski, Densusianu, and the "satanic" symbolist Ștefan Petică, and explains, strangely enough, that this obviously confusing mixture is a result of the fact that the young poet simply didn't want to decide on any specific expression within symbolism.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Minulescu's importance is both obvious and undeniable in regard to Samuel Rosenstock's future engagement in vanguard art and literature; according to the Minulescu expert Emil Manu,<sup>21</sup> one has only to quote "Cântec" to be sure that young Rosenstock was influenced by Minulescu, even to the extent that the poem may be defined as a pastiche:

*It's raining . . .*  
*Time is raining in rolling rhythms outside my lover's window . . .*  
*It's raining . . .*  
*And our love is passing*  
*Like time knocking on my lover's window*  
*It's raining . . .*  
*And time covers our white love*  
*With its heavy and gray mantle . . .*  
*The rain is weeping . . .*  
*And the black Forgetfulness sneaks into the house . . .*  
*The rain is weeping . . .*  
*It's raining . . .*  
*It's night . . .*  
*And our love is dying . . .*  
*The rain is weeping by the window . . .*  
*The wind is singing a hymn . . .*  
*Time is raining in rolling rhythms outside my lover's window . . .*  
*It's raining . . .*<sup>22</sup>

If it is always raining in the hopelessly disconsolate cities in Minulescu, the whole existence is enwrapped in rainy haze and agony in George Bacovia, according to Behring a lonely wanderer loosely associated with the circle around Macedonski, in whose *Literatorul* he also made his debut in 1899.<sup>23</sup> Like Macedonski and to some extent Minulescu too, Bacovia (whose real name was George Vasiliu but who like so many other poets had taken his pseudonym after his birthplace, Bacău in Moldavia) was the archetype of the romantic ideal of a poet, suffering from tuberculosis, a jack of all trades and enormously lonely, a man whose existence, according to the Swedish translator Jon Milos, was dominated by, or rather was reduced to, elementary concerns and needs: sickness, fear, cold, love, emotions, and metaphysical meditations, a universe filled with emptiness, where one meets other people only occasionally.<sup>24</sup> One cannot avoid thinking of Samuel Rosenstock either when Milos says that the country life described by Bacovia is humiliating, sad, tedious, and full of troubles; Bacovia's imagery is dominated by sepulchral chambers, cemeteries, empty squares, and desolate places where human communication is made impossible, places exposed to snow, rain, mist, and smoke. The most common seasons are autumn and winter, the most common words are twilight and night. Everything cries in Bacovia: things, nature, life, the soul, songs, even love. We find an excellent example in the collection *Plumb*—though it is published as late as 1916, it is typical of Bacovia's early poetry as well:

*It's autumn, there's rustle, there's sleep  
The trees on the street sigh;  
There's a cough, weeping, a void . . .*

*The lovers, more sick, more sad,  
Gesture strangely along the roads—  
And leaves, in everlasting sleep  
Fall heavy, wetted.*

*I stop and I go, and return,  
And the lovers sadden me deeply—  
A senseless laughter comes on me,  
It's cold, it drizzles.<sup>25</sup>*

It is obvious that Samuel Rosenstock was inspired not only by Macedonski's and Minulescu's but also by Bacovia's poetry, as it is that his future development toward Dada presumes his earlier relationship with Romanian symbolism, though he himself rejected the first poems he published in *Simbolul* and didn't allow Sașa Pană to publish them in *Primele poeme* in 1934, saying that they were not "particularly interesting," not because they were not symbolist but because the poet didn't wish to exaggerate their importance.<sup>26</sup> Tzara was an elegiac poet, surprisingly sensitive, the Romanian literary scholar Ion Negoïtescu declares, believing that Tzara would have continued to write in the same way as before if he had remained in Romania. By this he hints also at the strength of the specifically Romanian context.<sup>27</sup>

In this context it is equally impossible to avoid the enfant terrible of the Romanian turn of the century, namely the highly controversial dramatist and social satirist Ion Luca Caragiale, just as it is to avoid Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău, the gray judge of the supreme court of appeal in Bucharest who has gone down in history under the pseudonym of Urmuz and who, during the first decades of the new century, distributed his absurd and highly grotesque short stories among his few friends and other intellectuals in the Romanian capital just before committing suicide in 1923. Both of them are prominent personalities within Romanian satiric absurdism and must have exercised, in this capacity, an incomparable influence on the Romanians at Cabaret Voltaire.

Caragiale,<sup>28</sup> one of Ion Minulescu's most devoted admirers,<sup>29</sup> violently attacked the bourgeois morality and the patriotic strained pathos of the age. In his eyes everything sounded wrong—the nationalistic anthems, the unctuous songs of praise to the Romanian peasant and the Romanian village, the pathetic glorifying of the past of both samanism and poporanism. Caragiale lashed them all, both popular populism and the heritage of the bourgeois revolution of 1848, which he felt had turned into a disgusting alliance of hypocritical civil politicians in the urban areas and the boyar aristocracy in the countryside. In both novellas and short stories, comedies and more serious dramas, he lashed the princely courts in Bucharest and their hollow rituals, the stupid and banal mediocrities of the uneducated aristocracy, the patriarchal petite bourgeoisie of the courts and the schools, in editorial offices, in the party headquarters and out in the provinces, in the gray zones between urbanity and rurality.



His first short prose pieces were published in the satirical journal *Moftul român*, which he himself founded in 1893 together with the writer Anton Bacalbaşa and which carried the provocative subtitle of “The national-spiritist journal, biweekly organ for spreading occult sciences in Trajan Dacia.” At the turn of the century Caragiale acquired huge popular success with his satiric and burlesque pieces in *Universul*, one of the country’s most important newspapers, in which, for instance, “Rumania” appears as a country populated by stupid tenant farmers, a variety of cheating tradesmen, idiotic shyster lawyers, petty officials, foppish lieutenants, fat and mean priests, semi-educated suburbanites, and provincial petty citizens running “top-level politics” over a glass of wine, deceiving each other as they address their wives with a “bon soir” and call each other “msieu” and “mon cher” while strolling along the “promenade” and having “five o’clock tea.” The archetype is called “Mr. Lefter,” the prototype of the Romanian official and tenant, the police prefect and the lawyer, the officer and the journalist, the businessman and the father.

Caragiale, who himself tried in vain to run a tavern and a buffet at the railway station in Ploieşti, where he spent his childhood, describes remarkably often the “petty people” both in the capital and out in the provinces, officials and their wives, occasionally journalists that he meets on the train. He chaffs one pretentious idea after the other, brought up by blockheads and scoundrels, small ambitions and big quarrels among the petty bourgeois, often the foolishness of women spoiling both their children and their lap dogs. Caragiale parodies the jargon of officials and politicians as well, for instance the language in a letter sent to a girls’ school in a provincial town dealing with the delivery of firewood, or the case of a local police prefect who happens to sock one of the inhabitants of a small town, whereupon the relatives send a telegram to the king himself explaining: “Brother Costachel tortured to death secret dungeon local police. Deprived family craves body claims compensation kneeling before the throne. Long live the dynasty.” The comedy is harsh at the same time as the ironic distance lacks the bitterness of the explicitly political satire; Caragiale is never indifferent but from time to time most interested in the macabre as well as in the inexhaustible cruelty of man. At the same time he loves unexpected turns. In the short story “Inspectie,” for instance, the cashier Angelache behaves in a strange and sensational way just before his account books are inspected. Angelache is reported missing, and soon it is discovered that he has committed suicide. Everybody believes,

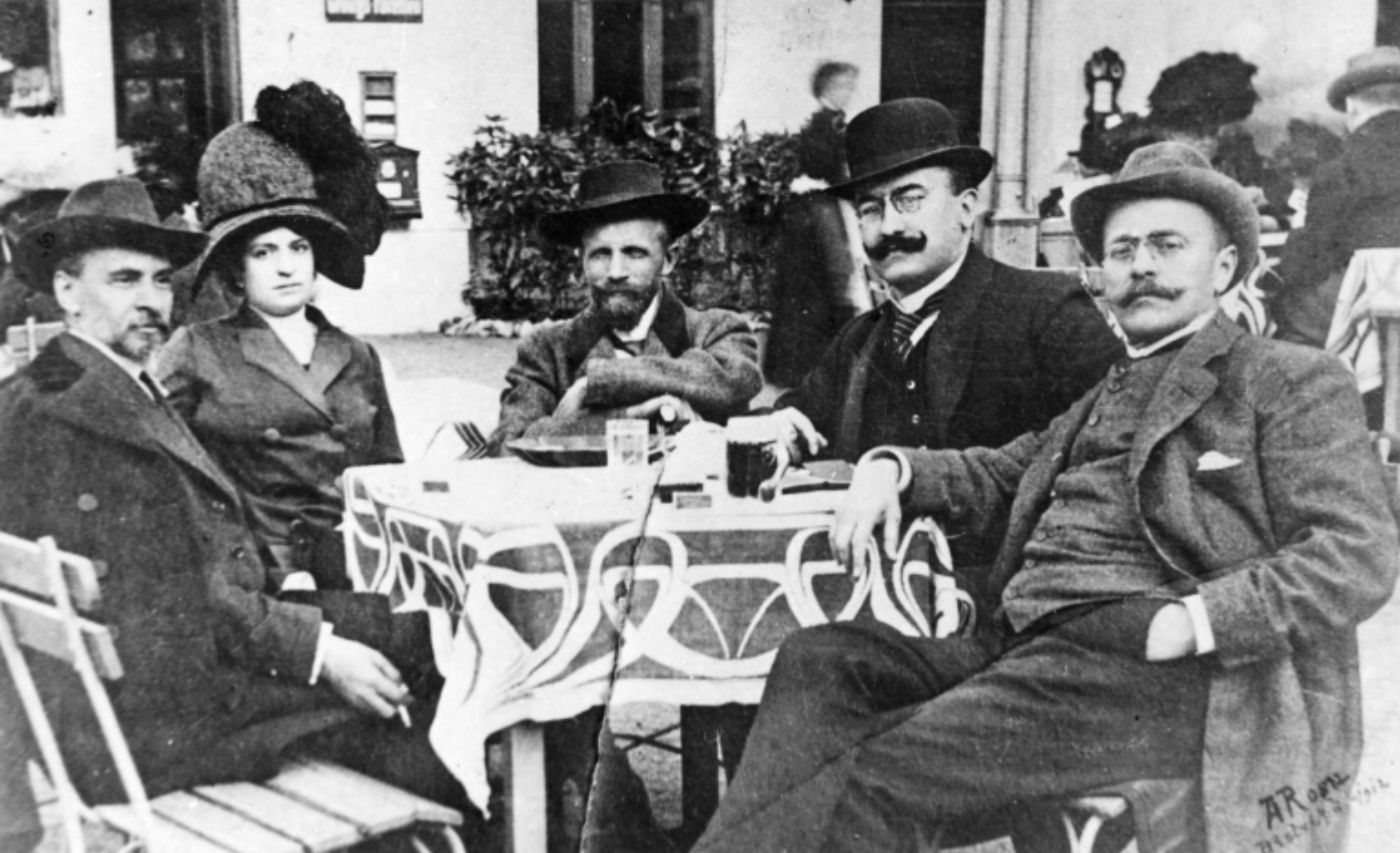


FIGURE 9.3

Ion Luca Caragiale (at right) in 1909.

Muzeul Literaturii Române, Bucharest.

of course, that he had embezzled most of the money—until the police discover that the account books are in the best order.

Caragiale's biography is as filled with fantastic happenings and events as his stories and dramas. Born into a theater family (his father first worked as an actor at the theater in Ploiești founded by his uncle Costache Caragiale and then as secretary at the monastery Mărgineni near Ploiești), Ion Luca Caragiale was considered illegitimate because his father was formally still married when he decided to live with the daughter of a Greek merchant in Brașov; the couple moved to the village of Haimanale. Ion Luca Caragiale also made a show of being an autodidact, though he had passed an upper school examination when he began voice lessons with uncle Costache at the academy of music in Bucharest, lessons in which he failed totally because of his miserable singing voice, whereupon his father, now senior juryman in Ploiești, saw to it that his son was appointed copying clerk at the same court. However, his father died in the same year—1870—and the son returned to Bucharest to work as a prompter and copyist at the National Theater at the same time as he was a proofreader at two daily newspapers. Ion Luca Caragiale made his debut three years later in the weekly magazine *Ghimpele* under the pseudonyms Car and Palicar; a few years later he published his own satiric magazine *Claponul*, dedicated to “the ladies and lassies in all suburbs, cul-de-sacs, and rural areas of Bucharest, as well as to all gentlemen, single or married.” During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 he published the newspaper *Națiunea română*, together with a French writer living in Bucharest, Frédéric Damé; it was extremely successful until its eighth issue happened to publish the notice, in every respect false, that King Carol's army had been captured at Pleuna (Pleven). After being somewhat successful within both the conservative, intellectual Junimea circle in Iași in 1878 and at the National Theater in Bucharest with his play *O noapte furtunoasă* and with a farce about how “Mr. Leonid meets the reaction” in 1880, Caragiale was appointed school inspector in both Suceava and Neamțu in northern Moldavia, where he also engaged in a public love affair with Veronica Micle, the mistress of Mihai Eminescu. After having the opportunity to read aloud the comedy *O scrisoare pierdută* at the royal court in Bucharest in the presence of Queen Elisabeta, and after several members of Junimea, among them his friend the critic Titu Maiorescu, came to dominate the new conservative government, Caragiale was appointed director of the National Theater in Bucharest, a post which he had to leave

shortly after because of his “impulsive leadership” and severe criticism from the national press. After losing his two daughters, one and two years old, respectively, he started his strongly provocative magazine *Moftul român*, which means “Romanian rubbish,” at the same time as he opened a beer hall in Bucharest, the first in a series of enterprises as grand as they were hopeless. In the same year—1901—as many of his short stories previously published in magazines and newspaper were collected in *Momente*, Caragiale brought an action against the writer C. A. Ionescu accusing him of plagiarism, celebrated his 25 years as a writer by holding a grand banquet at the Capșa, and began dreaming of the Romanian Academy awarding him the extremely prestigious Năsturel-Herescu prize. When it turned out that the academy didn’t agree with him about his enormous merits, the insulted Caragiale emigrated to Berlin, where he died in the same year as Samuel Rosenstock, the Iancu brothers, and Eugen Iovanaki formed the group behind *Simbolul*.

As a human being Ion Luca Caragiale is described as both impulsive and aggressive, a man who loved to deliver unmercifully mean sarcastic remarks and cruel practical jokes, almost dadaist, always at the expense of somebody else. He might, for instance, get angry at an old Hungarian market woman in Brașov only to imitate her anger and strange pronunciation before his friends afterward. In fact, he was a divinely gifted imitator, being able to speak like a Greek, a Jew, a Moldavian, like anybody, at the same time as he was an excellent improviser, storyteller, and reader of his own works. Furthermore, he is described as both nervously restless and extremely lavish, careless and light-hearted. He moved several times, not only in Bucharest but also in Berlin, at the same time as he had his family move from one room to another while spending his money on parties and various excesses among friends rather than on the household. The consequence was, of course, that he was always short of money, a fact that strained his relationship with the friends, who always forgave him. His bohemian trait is emphasized also by how restlessly he oscillated between political sympathies, in which, indeed, he was not alone and which illustrates also the corrupt political system of the period. As soon as he had joined Junimea, he gave up his liberal opinions on discovering that the circle strongly criticized liberal ideas. Only a couple of years later he had the liberal cabinet appoint him school inspector, only to be attracted by the socialists some years later, among whom, for instance, Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea came to be one of the most devoted members of his

circle. Shortly before the turn of the century Caragiale joined the extremely short-lived radical democratic party, only to enter Lascar Catargiu's conservative party, in whose newspaper *Epoca* he also wrote the political editorials.

Already a short summary of the course of events in, for instance, *O noapte furtunoasă*, one of Caragiale's best-reputed dramas, shows how the writer builds up his social critique permeated with popular humor and absurd satire, which mostly falls upon the "stupid," conceited, and politically naive petty bourgeois who spread liberal opinions like confetti while their gushing flow of words is full of linguistic blunders and undigested political phrases from whatever demagogic repertory. The play starts with a scene presenting the main character Dumitrache, a merchant in the forest industry and captain of the civic guard of a small provincial town, a scene that starts an extremely complicated love drama around Dumitrache, his wife Veta, her divorced sister Zita, and Chiriac, Dumitrache's assistant and sergeant of the guard, Dumitrache's friend Ipingescu, the police superintendent and the apprentice Spiridon, and the journalist Rica Venturjriano, who is trying to approach Zita but mistakenly whispers tender words in the ear of Veta instead and is discovered by Dumitrache and Ipingescu but succeeds in escaping from both of them. After numerous confusions Dumitrache agrees upon Zita marrying Rica, at the same time as it is obvious that he has been imposed on by his assistant, who has an affair with his wife—the play ends, of course, with the well-known theme of the imposed-upon, good-natured husband.

If the play about Dumitrache is a tolerably mellow parody of contemporary Romanian society, *O scrisoare pierdută*, which was given thirteen nights in a row at the National Theater in Bucharest as well as numerous times at the theaters in both Iași and Craiova, is an inordinate farce about the thoroughly corrupt political game and the confusions on the highest possible level in a small Romanian town in the mountains. The opening scene takes place in the drawing room of the hot-headed and extremely violent prefect Ștefan Țipătescu, where the unprincipled police commissioner Ghiță Pristanda, dishonest in every respect, tells the master how he has succeeded in getting hold of sensitive political material the night before by listening in secret to Nae Catavencu, editor of the local newspaper and member of the opposition party. Țipătescu urges the commissioner to follow up the matter while changing for a lunch at the house of the foolish Zaharia Tranache, chairman of both the local assembly of electors, the local education committee, and the committee of agriculture. When it

appears that Catavenu is a founding member of the encyclopedic cooperative society “Romania’s economic dawn” as well, it is obvious that all of those who are involved in the tangle are corrupt, egoistic, and totally unscrupulous in regard to the political game, in which Tranache’s heartless wife Zoe takes part with great enthusiasm as well.

Caragiale doesn’t avoid unmistakable, comic anachronisms either when, for instance, in the musical comedy *Hatmanul Baltag*, performed at the National Theater in Bucharest in March 1884 with music composed by Edvard Caudella, he has the obviously Dickens-inspired figures in a medieval Moldavian village go to the post office, visit the photographer, and talk like any elementary school teacher in any Romanian village of the end of the nineteenth century. Even his serious plays are full of comic points, for instance *Năpasta*, written in 1889, which takes place in a Romanian mountain village, where the teacher Gheorghe talks to the innkeeper Dragomir and his wife Anca about a notice published in the local newspaper, according to which Ion, a woodcutter nine years before found guilty of the murder of Anca’s first husband Dumitru, had escaped from the salt mines. Dragomir is convinced that Ion is mentally ill. Naturally Ion shows suddenly up and is taken good care of by Anca, who becomes more and more convinced that Dragomir is the real killer and who therefore makes the disastrous decision to kill Dragomir herself and to throw him in a well. After a violent scuffle between Ion and Dragomir the latter admits that Ion is not the killer of Dumitru. Dragomir and Ion are reconciled, however Ion commits suicide, dies dramatically, and is thrown in the well, whereupon Dragomir admits the murder of Dumitru, is arrested and sentenced by the villagers. No, the play was no success and was even accused of being a plagiarism of a Hungarian writer; nobody could identify with any of the characters, the audience feeling itself insulted by a description of Romanian country life as if it were Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, where everybody is evil and everything ends up in tragedy. The fact that the play didn’t please the audience is hardly a surprise, considering the “good taste” of the bourgeoisie as described by Caragiale himself. In the Junimea circle they were, for instance, convinced that there was no place on earth where *Faust* was better understood than in Bucharest; those who had attended the conservative politician Titu Maiorescu’s university courses were considered and considered themselves the equals of graduates of Oxford, the Sorbonne, or Göttingen. Caragiale himself tells how the speaker at

a serious political meeting stepped down the platform to show his new hand-made shoes to the ladies of “the society for protecting the Daco-Romanian muses.”

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Romanian literary historian Marin Sorescu refers to Ion Luca Caragiale when, speaking of Tristan Tzara, he describes the dadaists as a gang of young men always ready for new practical jokes, characterized by a spirit of mean hoaxes and a taste for tricks and theatricality.<sup>30</sup> According to Sorescu, the dadaists appear like true Caragiale figures in full action. At the same time it is scarcely a coincidence either that the Dada activities in Zurich started with a cabaret and that both Tristan Tzara, the Janco brothers, and Arthur Segal, all familiar with the Romanian tradition and Romanian contemporary practice, immediately were engaged in this. Both Hugo Ball’s and Emmy Hennings’s artistic development was intimately linked to the German expressionist theater and cabaret tradition, inspired by French vaudeville, but exactly this vaudeville tradition had undoubtedly inspired Caragiale as well, having been introduced to the Romanian stage in the mid-nineteenth century by the dramatist Vasile Alecsandri, once considered the national poet of Romania.<sup>31</sup> And doesn’t Serge Fauchereau say that Tristan Tzara must have read Ion Luca Caragiale very carefully, mentioning that Tzara’s artistic kinsman and countryman Eugène Ionesco himself admitted that he was dependent on Caragiale’s *O scrisoare pierdută*?<sup>32</sup>

The Romanian avant-garde culminated in the 1920s and 1930s with everything from provocative and typographically breakneck journals, revolutionary manifestos, and controversial exhibitions to functionalist architecture, modern dance performances, and different activities violently challenging the cultural establishment. The entire Bucharest seethed and bubbled, the coffeehouses were crowded with decadent bohemians, artists and poets, writers and actors, musicians and dancers, everybody in search of the latest trend, the most “ultramodern” available. Everybody felt that Bucharest, finally, was in the process of transforming into a “must” in the eyes of European modernism. Already in 1924 numerous internationally well-known artists took part in *Contimporanul*’s big exhibition in Bucharest, among them Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Lajos Kassák, and Karel Teige, at the same time as Béla Bartók was elected member of the Romanian Association of Composers in connection with his second big concert in Bucharest. One year later

Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird* was performed for the first time—in Bucharest. A couple of years later Stravinsky conducted the Bucharest Philharmonic Orchestra and Marinetti heated up the Romanians by his visit to the city, a visit that had been planned since 1912, and at the same time, for instance, the poet Benjamin Fundoianu and the painter Victor Brauner were doing everything possible to entice the surrealists in Paris to come to Bucharest.

Of course, like similar phenomena in the West, the Romanian avant-garde included several different, mutually related and internationally oriented groups within all available disciplines from fine arts and architecture through literature, music, theater, dance, and design, which also made Bucharest one of the most important centers of the modern movements in Central and Eastern Europe, with the Romanian groups continuously communicating with similar groups in Berlin, Paris, Lisbon, Rome, Milan, Hannover, Prague, Budapest, Belgrade, Warsaw, Kiev, and Moscow. Le Corbusier had visited Bucharest as early as 1911, the city in which Picasso and André Derain exhibited and Gleizes's and Metzinger's cubist ideas were discussed not only in *Simbolul* but also and particularly at Casa Capșa and Café Corso, and later at *Lap-taria*—"the milk bar"—as well. At the same time Benjamin Fundoianu's and Sandu Eliade's theater group *Insula* shocked the bourgeoisie, Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* was performed for the first time in Bucharest, while Theo van Doesburg, Hans Richter, F. T. Marinetti, and André Breton contributed to *Contimporanul*. Marcel Iancu traveled to Paris to get in touch with André Breton, Robert Delaunay, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Paul Éluard, and Jean Cocteau, while George Enescu played Stravinsky in Philadelphia and the first Romanian jazz band—the Hot Chaps—played at the restaurants in Bucharest. Marinetti visited Bucharest at the same time as the Romanian surrealists started their own journal *Alge* and Victor Brauner discussed surrealist ideas in Paris with Breton and Aragon. While Stravinsky and Maurice Ravel conducted the Bucharest Philharmonic Orchestra, the first monumental functionalist buildings were built along Bulevardul Magheru, among them Horia Creangă's ARO building, Emil Nădejde's Scala, and Arghir Culina's Hotel Ambassador, and Marcel Iancu planned more than thirty functionalist villas in different parts of the city. The international attitude was underlined also by an extensive Romanian participation in Western European modernism from Dada in Zurich through expressionism in Berlin, from futurism in Milan through surrealism in Paris. Thus, for instance, the artist Milița



Petrașcu belonged to the circle of friends and acquaintances of Robert and Sonia De-launay in Paris by the end of the 1910s, while, for instance, the painter Hans Mattis-Teutsch held one-man shows in Berlin, Paris, Rome, and Chicago, the musician Zeno Vancea studied in Vienna, and Irina Codreanu exhibited in Brussels. In the 1930s Mattis-Teutsch, for instance, was cooperating with the Kiepenheuer publishing company in Potsdam at the same time as the composer Constantin Silvestri participated in the international festival of contemporary music held in Venice and Enescu's opera *Oedip* was performed at the Paris opera house, while Víctor Brauner and Jacques Hérold officially joined the surrealists in Paris and Marcel Iancu, Max Herman Maxy, and Milița Petrașcu took part in the futurist world expo in New York in 1936. Brauner, who moved to Paris for good in 1938, cooperated with both Max Ernst and René Magritte while Codreanu exhibited in Venice, Milan, and Paris.

The Romanian avant-garde, characterized by its surprisingly extensive international interest and approach, wouldn't have been Romanian if it hadn't consciously connected itself to its own domestic points of departure as well, its own national legitimacy, even though the avant-gardists never formed any homogeneous national front line like the modernists in other Central and Eastern European countries. The abundant multiplicity of actors and artistic modes of expression prevented a national or nationalistic unity, at the same time as the "national questions" were taken care of by an unusually aggressive ethno-nationalist establishment directly confronted with imported vanguard ideas stressing the modern instead of the national heritage or the old peasant culture. However, the poet Geo Bogza was obviously searching for a kind of historical continuity in Romanian culture as such, though a short one, in baptizing his own journal in January 1928, a magazine of five issues in all to which, among others, Tristan Tzara and the poets Ilarie Voronca and Stephan Roll contributed.<sup>33</sup> Bogza justified the peculiar title *Urmuz* in his manifesto-like editorial in the first issue of the magazine,<sup>34</sup> in which he referred to a "Him" whom Bogza compared to Jesus. According to Bogza, both must be written with capital letters, since both loved the future and therefore were apostles of the future world, at the same time as hatred, mockery, and derision formed the dark side of their lives. Bogza takes great liberties of expression; he doesn't show any stupid respect for conventional linguistic rules and breaks freely with Romanian grammar and syntax:

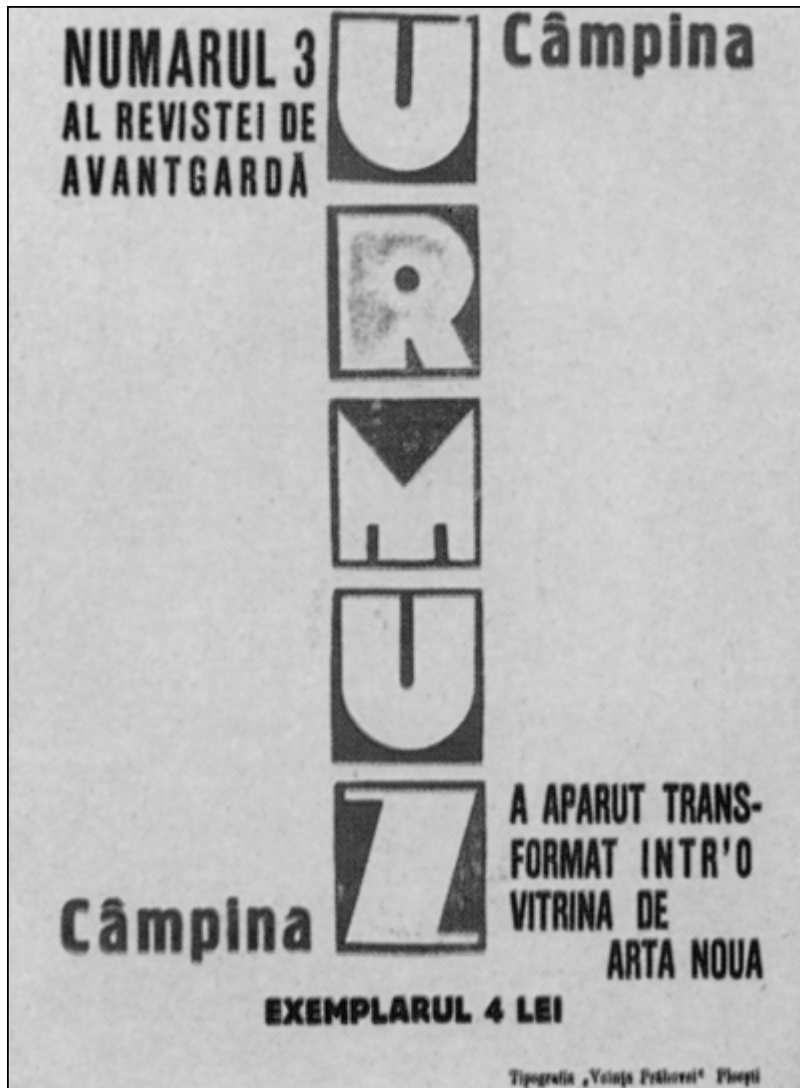


FIGURE 9.4

*Urmuz*, no. 3, 1928.

*Between us and Him, a footbridge where feelings stroll as in a dance, fusing fraternally*

*The great and absurd synthesis is born: the synthesis of Nothing.*

. . .

*The beads of time frozen, or gushing vertiginously, lose significance.*

*But terrestrial destiny brutalizes by forcing one to days with mercantile pre-occupations. Then Urmuz seems an absurd dream and at times the shame of having fraternized once with a madman fated to be swallowed by the very darkness of the instant following his disappearance.*

*And still, it is not so.*

*Urmuz lives.*

*His presence among us whips to lash our consciousness. In the basement of our soul, bent deeply from the waist down we follow the traces his steps have left gashing violently the earth, trivialized by the mundane.*

*Virgin ears still bleed from the deflowering precipitated by his impetuous and virile sentence.*

*From this moment on the word becomes a fertile spermatozoid. . . .*

*Our duty is to intensify it to the maximum.*

*Abandoning the false star, compelling this clown's somersault to keep our souls warm through its friction, we cherish the dream to locate someday the veritable sun.*

*And then . . .*<sup>35</sup>

Urmuz was one of the many short-lived, intensely vanguard magazines at this time, but differed in many respects from, for instance, Vinea's and Iancu's *Contimporanul*, Voronca's and Roll's *75HP*, Scarlat Callimachi's *Punct*, Max Herman Maxy's, F. Brunea-Fox's, and Ion Calagaru's *Integral*, Saşa Pană's *Unu*, and Aurel Baranga's *Alge* in being named for a writer. It is true that the writer had died five years before, but he had already been transformed into something of a patron and major forerunner of the Romanian avant-garde, to whom *Unu* also dedicated an entire issue in 1930. In that year Saşa Pană published the collection of Urmuz's stories called *Algazy & Grummer*,<sup>36</sup> the title of which is taken from one of the stories in the "weird pages"—*pagini bizare*—that Urmuz had begun to write around 1907 and which had been circulating

among his few friends and especially in the avant-garde circles in Bucharest since then. According to Pană,<sup>37</sup> Urmuz would have reached the peak of his production had he had the opportunity of performing at Cabaret Voltaire, but unfortunately he was born too early and wrote his stories during a period that didn't appreciate his Alfred Jarry-like absurdism, though he has since attracted attention as one of Romania's most important writers. Urmuz, says Pană, built a telescope for hell, a torch whose beam was directed toward the contemporary burlesque and its persons; to describe his discourse is to capture a storm in a cage.

Interestingly enough, one of the most influential poets and writers of the avant-garde was responsible for inventing the peculiar pseudonym Urmuz in 1922. Tudor Arghezi had made his debut as early as 1886; in his capacity as editor of the prestigious monthly magazine *Cugetul românesc*, he more or less forced an unwilling author to accept his new identity suitable for a contributor to the magazine. The author was a judge of the supreme court of appeal in Bucharest, christened Dim. Dumitrescu with the surname of Ionescu-Buzău but calling himself Demetru Dem. Demetrescu-Buzău, where the last part of the name reveals that the family derived its origin from the town of Buzău in northeastern Wallachia.<sup>38</sup> Mr. Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău didn't wish to be published under his own name together with, for instance, the premier Ion I. C. Brătianu, Daimandy, former minister to St. Petersburg, and Emil Antonescu, professor at the university of Bucharest; despite his obvious anarchistic tendencies, the distinguished judge simply didn't dare to be published along with these illustrious, important men, and since Arghezi recognized the ironic point in publishing the weird pages side by side with serious political issues, the judge and he soon agreed upon the compromise solution of using the seemingly senseless pseudonym.<sup>39</sup>

The readers could scarcely misunderstand the irony when *Cugetul românesc* thus published the stories "Pâlnia și Stamate" and "Ismail și Turnavitu" in its second and third issue and "Dupa furtuna" in its sixth and seventh issue in 1922. In fact, the readers must have believed it was a pure joke, which in a way it was from the editor's perspective, when they began reading the first lines of the first story about "the Funnel and Stamate" starting with a "determination of position" describing a well-ventilated apartment consisting of three rooms, a glass-enclosed terrace, and a doorbell:

*Out front, a sumptuous living room, its back wall taken up by a solid oak book-case perennially wrapped in soaking bedsheets. . . . A legless table right in the middle, based on probability calculus and supporting a vase containing eternal concentrate of the “thing itself;” a clove of garlic, the statuette of a priest (from Ardeal) holding a book of syntax . . . and 20 cents for tips . . . the rest being without interest whatsoever. This room, it should be noted, which is forever engulfed in darkness, has no doors and no windows; it does not communicate with the outside world except through a tube which sometimes gives off smoke and down which, nights, one can have a glimpse of Ptolemy’s seven hemispheres, and daytime, two human beings in the process of descending from the ape by the side of a finite string of dry okra right next to the infinite, and useless, Auto-Kosmos.*

*The second room is in Turkish style; it is decorated in the grand manner and furnished with the most fantastic items of eastern luxury. . . . Countless precious carpets, hundreds of old arms, the stains of heroic blood still on them, lining the colonnades; the walls, according to the oriental custom, are painted red every morning as they are measured, occasionally, with a pair of compasses for fear of random shrinkage.*

*From this area, and by means of a trap door on the floor, one reaches an underground vault, and on the right, after traveling on a little handledriven cart first, one enters a cool canal one branch of which ends no one knows where, the other leading precisely in the opposite direction to a low enclosure with a dirt floor and a stake in its center to which the entire Stamate family is tethered.<sup>40</sup>*

The father, working for the city council, is forced all day long to keep chewing on raw celluloid which he expels in salivated crumbs over his only child, a fat, blasé boy of four called Bufty who drags a small stretcher on the ground as his mother joins in the communal revels by composing madrigals that are signed by the application of one finger. Occasionally all three of them peer through binoculars through a crack in the canal at Nirvana throwing bread crumb pellets or corn cobs on it. One day Stamate happens to see a seductive siren in the tube stretching her lascivious body on the hot sands. Stamate rushes to rent a boat and sets off on the open sea followed by the singing and motioning siren, until about a dozen dryads, nereids, and tritons have

time to get together from far, wide, and deep points of the sea and to bring up, onto a superb seashell, an innocent and too decent-looking rusty funnel. Finally at home Stamate dusts the funnel with a rag, swabs iodine on the larger holes, and flies through the communication tube, stealing a kiss on his way. However, the funnel seems to get smaller and smaller every day and Stamate soon finds out to his surprise and disappointment that his son has been in the funnel. He takes a singular decision:

*He first embraced his devoted spouse, and after giving her a coat of paint in a hurry he sewed her inside a waterproof bag so he could further preserve the cultural traditions of his family intact. On a cold and dark night, next, he took the funnel and Bufty and, throwing them both onto a tram car that happened to be passing by, he waved them disdainfully off to Nirvana; later on, though, he managed, with the help of science and his own chemical calculations, his paternal feelings having prevailed in the meantime, to have Bufty appointed as bureau sub-chief over there.<sup>41</sup>*

The second story in *Cugetul românesc*—the story about Ismail and Turnavitu—is equally breakneck, absurd, and inordinately grotesque. Ismail, made up of eyes, sideburns, and a dress, never walks all by himself but always in the company of a badger to which he is leashed by a steamer cable and which he eats raw after he has ripped its ears off and squeezed some lemon on. His best friend is Turnavitu, for a long time simply an air fan in the various dirty Greek coffeehouses on Covaci and Gabroveni streets. Unable to stand the odor he was forced to breathe in those places, Turnavitu has gone into politics and has succeeded in being named a fan of the Federal State at the Radu Voda fire department kitchens. Seeing the terrible state he was in on account of his frequent gyrations, the soft-hearted Ismail takes him under his wing; Turnavitu is appointed chamberlain at the badgers' place with the obligation of taking, once a year and in the form of a jerry can, a trip to Majorca and Minorca, most of these trips consisting of the hanging of a lizard on the Port Captain's doorknob.

"Dupa furtuna" is a story about a peculiar event happening after a storm when the rain has stopped and the clouds have scattered completely. A man without a

name wanders in the dark night, his clothes wet and his hair unkempt, looking for a cranny he might take shelter in, until he arrives at a crumbling crypt of a cloister. He approaches warily, smells and licks it about 56 times in succession without getting any results. Feeling frustrated, he grabs his sword and rushes into the cloister's courtyard, where he meets a hen who invites him to wait for a few moments in the chancery. Having gradually calmed down, moved to tears, he gives up any plans of revenge and, after kissing the hen on the forehead, he puts her in a secure place for safekeeping. The story ends when the man, pained and disheartened after the trying times he has been through, returns to his native village where, fed up with living as a bachelor, he decides to make a home for himself and the hen and to make himself useful to his fellowmen by teaching them the art of midwifery.

The oldest of seven brothers and sisters, Urmuz was born in March 1883 in the small provincial town of Curtea de Argeș,<sup>42</sup> where his father Dr. Dimitrie Ionescu-Buzău worked as a district medical officer, until he was appointed doctor first at the Brâncoveanu and then in 1889 at the Colțea hospital in Bucharest, where he also became professor of hygiene at Matei Basarab University. The father is described as extremely authoritarian and has also been compared to the father of Urmuz's Czech kindred spirit Franz Kafka.<sup>43</sup> It is told also that he spoke and wrote in both Latin and Greek and that he read the gospels in Church Slavonic. Urmuz's mother Eliza Ionescu-Buzău is said to have had a characteristic taste for jokes and humor like her own father, the priest Filip Pascani, highly praised by no less than Ion Luca Caragiale on account of his special humor; at the same time she was deeply religious and prayed all the obligatory prayers every night in the company of her children, at which Demetru, called Mitică, often laughed loudly at the strange words and expressions. Uncle Cristian Pascani was a well-known professor of chemistry with whom the family spent a whole year in Paris before moving to Bucharest, where they lived on Strada Antim and then on Strada Apolodor. Apparently Urmuz's mother was responsible also for his musical interest; she herself had studied at the Academy of Music in Bucharest but was forced to break off her studies to marry Dr. Ionescu-Buzău, a man who detested "the fiddlers" and the other musicians and therefore rejected the idea of his son following the footsteps of his mother, despite his son's burning interest in classical music. Already as a

small child Urmuz had showed unusual musical talents and dreamed of composing classical music, but he was extremely shy, had too much respect for his father, and took an escape into literature instead: he began devouring popular science books and science fiction novels, among them books by Jules Verne, and dreamed, long before the radio was invented, of building a machine able to capture the sound waves of the universe.

In the primary school Mitică seemed to be both diligent and compliant, while at the Gheorghe Lazăr upper secondary school he horrified both the headmaster and the teachers by a seemingly inexhaustible repertory of pranks, practical jokes, and defiant provocations against everything authoritarian and dictatorial. At the same time, outside school he was described as inward-turning, lonely, and extremely shy, especially with girls. At this time he also met Gheorghe Ciprian, later in life the author, according to Eugène Ionesco,<sup>44</sup> of a very interesting play, *Kirika*, which Pitoëff put up in Paris in the interwar period. In his company Urmuz loved to perform one “dadaist” provocation after another, which Ionesco also compares to Alfred Jarry’s similar provocations at about the same time. But not everything was about provocations. Born and raised in a solid upper-class family, Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău developed a kind of double life in between the bourgeois salons, the government offices, and the restaurants and coffeehouses of the bohemians and intellectuals of all colors. He also submitted to his father’s will and began studying medicine at the university, something he went through for a whole academic year but then never returned to, simply because, as he said, those corpses that he was meant to dissect refused to talk—“I pinched, nipped, and squeezed day after day, but none of them reacted.” He began studying law instead, as well as counterpoint and composition at the Academy of Music.

After doing his military service at one of the infantry regiments in Bucharest, Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău passed the examination in law in 1904. Three years later his father died in the same year as two of his brothers also died of tuberculosis and his beloved sister Lizică got married. The family was divided up and the eldest son was appointed judge in the small provincial town of Rachitele in the Argeş district, working a few years later as secretary, judge, and lawyer in country towns like Cazimcea and Ghergani in the Tulcea and Târgovişte regions, respectively. He became a



FIGURE 9.5

Marcel Iancu, *Urmuz*,

1923. Academia Română,

Bucharest.



gray and plain clerk living in a small room next to his office. He detested his routine and extremely boring work and dreamed of returning to Bucharest and the concerts at the Ateneul, despite, for instance, the country squire of Rachitele offering him his daughter in marriage after he recited some of his “phantasmagories,” short hallucinatory stories filled with absurd humor and grotesque jokes, exactly as he had done among his family and friends at home in Bucharest. In time he returned to the capital with the extremely uneventful appointment as secretary and judge at the supreme court of appeal. During the Balkan War he served at the front in Bulgaria, and two years later he followed the court and the other governmental offices to Moldavia to escape the war and the German occupation of Bucharest. For him the war was no experience for proud and patriotic boasting, since he spent most of the time in bed shivering with malaria. There is also a photograph dating from this time showing Lieutenant Demetrescu-Buzău dressed up for the studio camera with his right hand in the pocket and left hand on the saber hilt; the look is still firm, the moustache dark and well formed. On a photograph taken a few years later he is dressed in civilian clothes with white shirt, dark tie, black jacket, and black waistcoat; the moustache is bushy, the look has become sad, almost appealing, while the shiny black hair is irreproachably parted in the middle as customary with clerks and officials.

To all appearances as a result of disgusting experiences during the wars, returning home to Bucharest Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău chose to live an extremely ascetic and isolated life with long night walks, at the same time continuing to read his phantasmagories in the circles of his family and few friends, stories that soon began to circulate among the bohemians at the cafés and restaurants along the Calea and elsewhere, which doesn't make it impossible that Samuel Rosenstock, the Iancu brothers, and the other poets and writers behind *Simbolul* and *Chemarea* may by now have become acquainted with the weird pages and their grotesque world. Nevertheless, the properly and correctly dressed judge was a catastrophically lonely man, reserved and afraid of human contacts. “Love” was taken care of at the brothel. He ate hardly anything, had extremely few friends to turn to, and had great difficulties sleeping, an experience shared by his brother in misfortune Emil Cioran some decades later. But he began to be known as the author of absurd, grotesque, and, according to the literary establishment, “totally incomprehensible” short stories, novellas, and prose poems defying both the laws of empirical reality and the rules of literary

fiction, and occasionally both classical syntax and the literary rational construction of sentences as well. A world of black humor, morbid fantasies, and logical somersaults emerges especially out of the author's autobiographical experiences as judge in the small, sleepy country towns. According to Ionesco,<sup>45</sup> his texts are small, absurd poems and stories seemingly meant for children but rather cruel, fantastic stories reminding one of Lewis Carroll or the atmosphere within the pataphysic tradition. The stories are permeated by the same will to provoke as the practical jokes carried out in the company of Ciprian, a joking with literature, with the language, people, and society of a country which is busy getting itself a serious and solemn bourgeoisie. According to Ionesco, Urmuz's literary method is pretty simple: he puts in a hat disparate elements of thought, whole systems, members of a juridical-social organism, human faces, bird feathers and beaks, scattered psychological entities, Christianity, logic, language, civilization. All this he mixes together, then takes away the waste products and places them in a row in a new order, seemingly capricious but as possible as any other, since—as we all know—the more capricious something is, the more it can reveal.

The social protest melts into the black, absurd humor, which Urmuz apparently pours out of both his inner world and the literary tradition as well as the often “absurd” folkloric art and literature. For instance, Mihai Eminescu was inspired by popular legends and songs when consciously violating time and space according to an abnormal and disintegrated logic within the limits of the extraordinary. Some decades before the turn of the century Ion Creangă as well wrote several miraculous stories full of grotesqueries, displacements of scale, and illogical surprises, a turning reality upside-down directly inspired by the folkloric tradition. This is also the point of departure for Mihail Sadoveanu when, at the turn of the century, he tells of various ghosts wandering to and fro in an unreal reality, of the mysterious inhabitants of the woods gathering together talking and whispering to each other, of people taken by surprise by magicians and wizards, and, for instance, of a terrible whirlwind turning into a dragon. Indeed, Urmuz cannot have avoided Ion Luca Caragiale either, who in fact was a good friend of his uncle, but Urmuz goes much further than him in the burlesque grotesqueries. In short, Urmuz describes the alienation of man and the self in terms of animal-like and mechanical creatures, half man, half animal and puppet,



FIGURE 9.6

Foisorul de Foc in Bucharest at  
the turn of the century. Fundația  
Culturală Română, Bucharest.

determined and characterized by the absurdity of existence itself and by immediate inner impulses in a dissolved, absurd universe.

Characteristic of Urmuz's literary method is the almost total absence of the figurative level, literally eaten up by the concrete, nonsymbolic meaning. The characters are built up morpho-mechanically, thus recalling similar visual constructions by, for instance, Picabia, Duchamp, Ernst, Picasso, Dalí, and Miró.<sup>46</sup> The principle of mimesis is rejected altogether in favor of the effects of surprise of the collage technique. Almost every figure is also driven by a kind of undefined sadomasochistic will to sexual pleasure, never satisfied. Urmuz sets the life and actions of his characters free from every logical or rational motivation and allows chance to reign, letting everything appear as pure nonsense, at the same time as he questions traditional notions of value and dismantles established hierarchies and ingrained ideas about the grandness and sublimity of life. Sometimes the story is about Algazy, the nice old man with silky beard, neatly laid out on a grill that is screwed under his chin and surrounded by barbed wire. Sometimes it is about the man dreaming of going abroad to celebrate his silver wedding anniversary who discovers that his wife doesn't want to accompany him, gnawed as she is by jealousy on account of the love ties she suspects he has with a seal, whereupon he takes off his fur cap, gives up all his titles and wealth, takes all his clothes off except for a linden bark rope around his waist, gets on the first covered wagon that comes his way, reaching the nearest town in a gallop, and proceeds to join the local bar association. One of the stories, published for the first time in *Punct* in 1925, is about Emil Gayk, the civilian who believes in being prepared for any eventuality and who carries on a state of war for three years against his conscientious niece, over a front almost seven hundred kilometers long. Yet another story, published in *Punct* in 1925 as well, describes the shopkeeper Cotadi and his friend Dragomir, the former dressed in a garment of laths and given to punctuating conversations with customers with several powerful blows on the floor with the edge of a piano lid that is screwed on his back just above his buttocks.

If the story about Emil Gayk indirectly refers to the author's own experiences during the war, the story about the musician Fuchs, titled "The Fuchsiad" and published for the first time in *Unu* in 1930, is more or less evidently autobiographical as well. At his birth Fuchs chose to come out through one of his grandmother's ears, his mother having no musical ear to speak of. Already at the music conservatory he

takes the shape of a perfect chord, discovering in puberty that he grows genitals that are but one young and exuberant fig leaf. Through various episodes he finally reaches the love goddess Venus herself on Mount Olympus, waiting for him in an alcove, naked, light-skinned, her hands raised behind her head and joined under her unbraided golden hair in a gesture of delicious abandon and intense voluptuousness, stretching her superb milky body on the bed of soft cushions and flowers. Confused and disappointed, Fuchs succeeds, however, in offending the goddess, who red with anger shakes her head, gracefully yet powerfully enough to make Fuchs fall down to earth. Suddenly all Olympus is up in a roar, shouts and threats rain all about, but Pallas Athena unexpectedly intervenes on Fuchs's behalf and he is allowed to return to earth, but on one condition: he must wipe out snobbery and intellectual cowardice from the arts of the earth. However, Fuchs is not successful in this either and is cursed by the gods. Excommunicated, Fuchs sits hurriedly at the piano and, pedaling energetically and uninterruptedly, he finally arrives at his big quiet home, depressed, disconcerted, disgusted with mankind and with the gods, love, and the muses.

According to unanimous report, Fuchs is based on the extremely popular Theodor Fuchs, pianist at the royal court in Bucharest, close to the queen, who used to call him "my little Fuchs." He composed several concertos and music to popular songs and poems, also poems written by the queen herself, but fell out of favor with the queen and finished his career as pianist of shabby Bucharest motion picture theaters. Himself dreaming of being a composer and a musician and never missing any concert, Urmuz must have been touched by Fuchs's attested pubertal, innocent, and at the same time indescribably clumsy appearance.

According to his sister Eliza—Lizică—Vorvorea, Urmuz's devastating humor was an asset not only for himself but also for the whole family.<sup>47</sup> In her memoranda, written in 1967, he doesn't believe that any of his morbid characters ever haunted him; Urmuz was only shocked by the sound value of some words and by the unexpectedness of human actions. Something that really pained him was the work at the court, the daily routine, the endless copying of one senseless document after another. In his capacity as an unsuccessful composer, his only escape was to struggle with notes refusing to take the shape of the grand music he so eagerly desired. Nothing seemed to be as he wished, and unable to put up with his failure he took his own life at forty years old. The story about Fuchs ends also in a kind of prelude to the author's

FIGURE 9.7

Theodor Fuchs at the turn of the century. Muzeul de Istorie a Evreilor din România "sef rabin dr. Moses Rosen," Bucharest.



own suicide when Fuchs takes the piano with him and disappears into “the bosom of the great and boundless nature.” According to his sister, Urmuz had been seized by the feeling of absurd senselessness and emptiness, the insight that life is only a matter of blindly obeying fate, a matter of letting a body be born only to die and molder away. Urmuz was haunted by an ontological agony of death; in connection with his brother Constantin’s death in January 1914, he spoke of nothing but death and the fact that there is no meaning in life since death implacably reveals its hollowness. Some months later he wrote also that the revolver is the “master of the world”: the revolver is “the strongest of gods,” since it may make its own decisions with no help from the brain.

According to the official police report, signed on 23 November 1923 by commissioner N. Dezideratu, chief of police station no. 3, the police constable on duty, Mr. Gheorghe Roșu, no. 738, discovered the body of a well-dressed man in the bushes behind the restaurant Bufetul on Kiseleff Avenue, at the crossing of Ianu Avenue and Strada Dumitru Ghika. The man was lying on his back with his face upward, shot in the right temple, holding a revolver, marked S.T.M., in his right hand, dressed in a gray costume and a gray striped coat, black shoes, and a maroon hat. On searching the pockets the police found several notes, letters, the amount of 943 lei in a black purse, a golden watch without a lid, and two keys, as well as the membership card, no. 10436, of the association of civil servants in the name of D. Demetrescu-Buzău, clerk assistant at the supreme court of appeal residing on 13 Strada Apolodor. The revolver had five bullets still in the magazine. After the transportation of the body to the mortuary, “by notice no. 121210/23.XI.1923,” and after the attorney on duty confirmed the identity of the dead man, Mr. Stoicescu, superior civil servant at the ministry of industry and trade, brother-in-law of Mr. Demetrescu-Buzău, signed a written declaration endorsed by the attorney and enclosed with the statement of the commissioner according to which Mr. Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău had been extremely nervous during the last months. The newspaper *Lupta* reported that a judge at the supreme court of appeal had committed suicide as the result of a “grave disease,” while the newspaper *Diminieata* told its readers that several letters were found according to which the man had put an end to his own life “because of the paralysis that makes one’s life impossible.”



It is told that a lonely, unknown woman came to the family after the burial asking whether there were any letters left at the death of the judge. We don't know the nature of the answer.

When Eugène Ionesco, who studied at the University of Bucharest and who also got to know many of the surrealists of the Romanian avant-garde, left Romania in 1937, he planned to write about the Romanian sources of Dada; according to him, Urmuz was the major source of inspiration for Tristan Tzara, as well as for Ion Vinea, Jacques Costin, Gheorghe Ciprian, and Tudor Arghezi. Within this current, Ionesco says in an interview with Claude Bonnefoy in 1975, there was not only “a little bit of symbolism” but also attempts similar to those that would continue in Italy, France, and Switzerland in regard to futurism and dadaism. According to Ionesco, Urmuz, Ciprian, and most of their friends were revolting against logic and old conventions by writing against society, against the Romanian state and its language, and linked this anarchism to black humor, “or they would have gone totally mad.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Ionesco adds, Urmuz's works were a declaration of bankruptcy, exactly the bankruptcy of society that evoked the surrealists' reaction in France. Ionesco forgets that at least Marcel and Iuliu Iancu belonged to the same circle, but more important may be that Ionesco himself was influenced by the lonely judge at the supreme court of appeal in Bucharest.

Serge Fauchereau, similarly, says that Tzara sprang from the same branch as Urmuz, whether he had in fact read the weird stories or not.<sup>49</sup> Fauchereau suggests also that Tzara's black humor, so evident in a poem like “Se spînzură un om” about a man who hangs himself, written in 1915, not only shows the influence of the German absurdist Christian Morgenstern's *Galgenlieder*, published in 1905, but may also owe something to the weird pages of Urmuz, oral versions of which were circulating in the coffeehouses of Bucharest at about the same time as Tzara and his friends abandoned symbolism and started their search for more viable literary forms.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the Romanian literary scholar Marin Mincu declares, what Urmuz managed to do in prose, Tzara had achieved already in his early poetry, i.e., to break open the literary conventions without rejecting the traditional lyrical images, which he instead polemicized against and placed in a new, dialogical, mutual relationship within poetic narration.<sup>51</sup>

STRADA CORABIEI No. 6

No. 50-51

CATALOG

PRIMA EXPOZIȚIE INTERNAȚIONALĂ

**CONTIMPORANUL**

szoka

- hans ARP
- artur SEGAL
- BRĂNCUȘI floquet
- Darimont
- serwranckx
- IANCU
- l'empereur HAUT
- matis TEUTSCH
- KURT schwitters
- mița PETRAȘCU Zarnover
- m. h. MAXY hans RICHTER
- charles TEIGE peri paul KLEE
- victor BRAUNER Kassak
- viking EGGELING
- BUHOLZ roset PETERS DIDA
- ernest VOGENA HUER

SALA „SINDICATULUI ARTELOR FRUMOSE“

30 NOIEMBRIE - 30 DECEMBRIE 1924











PLATE 6

Unknown, *Samuel Rosenstock*. Mira Rinzler, Naples, Florida.







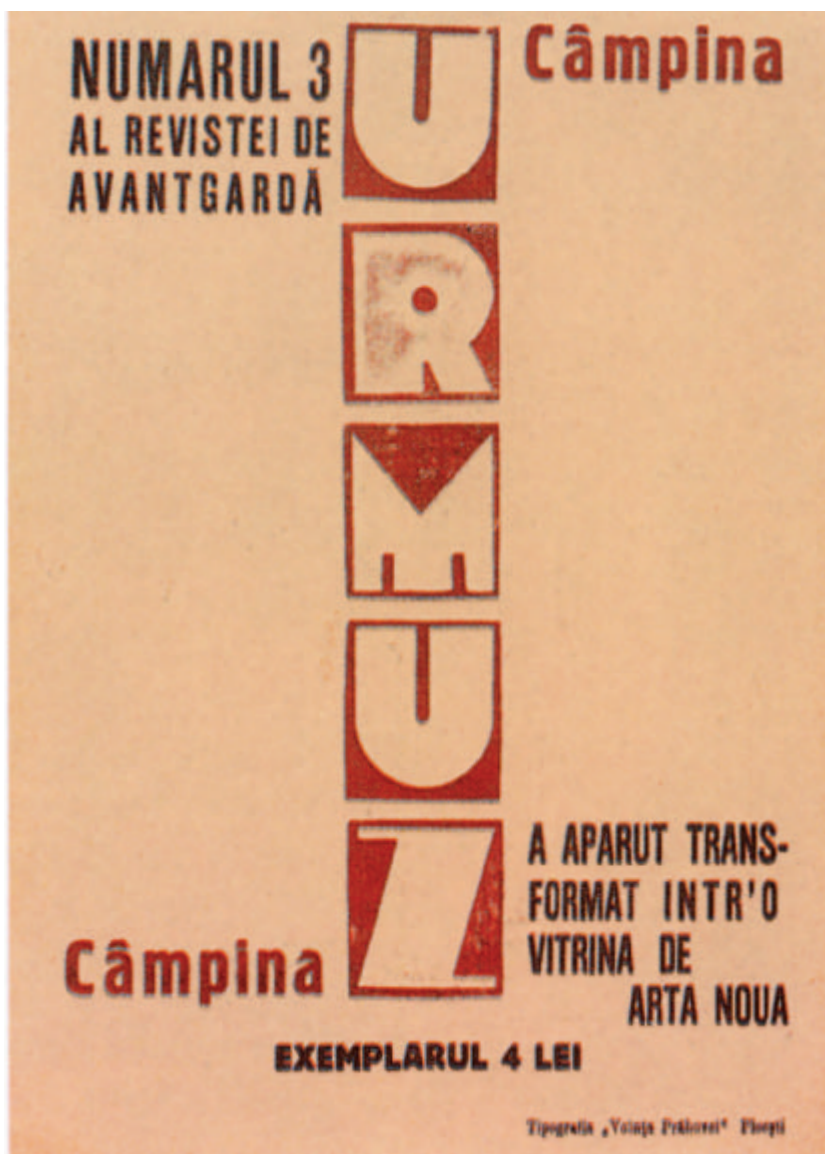
PLATE 8

Nicolae Grigorescu, *Lodging House in Oraşii*, undated. Muzeul Naţional de Artă, Bucharest.



PLATE 9

Arthur Segal, *Village Road*, 1910. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.











# PUNCT No. 1

REVISTA DE LITERATURA ARTA CONSTRUCTIVISTA  
15 NOEMBRIE 1924

## L'ORREILLE A CAREAUX

In oglinda  
jurnalul sataneacerilor fugarii si  
toate clopotele invazii kildoni  
(este inceput al dinuie pizicului)  
atentione domnilor galestru-  
ni o 10', virginal de ce nu ma  
intrelegi nu vreau sa ma intrelegi  
sa vedeti: nu ma cu alt. La me-  
gustache velle: De Directorii arese  
Nipocul răsădit la Inocentiat ven-  
sulai de domnilor de directorilor  
de domni de domni de directorilor  
de domni de domni de directorilor  
regulă de 1-— pară răsunătoare  
le probleme de la mizantropia  
unele preocupări arăsa marci la  
sua agrotanțiale cui puse dire-  
to amn în anul egiptic. Clary  
Clary est-ce-qa il faut être ac-  
tivistul 1-Nem iaduce. Cevașul  
atci începe vătăl mea, licență;  
lei commence mon rôle, an-  
tegal: îmi sângi revine roșie an  
ochiul aling: qui comentează il  
mă rătăc vătăl rătăc: șiel începe  
trina mea un vintu: trabaie să  
schimbăm trebură socială eali-  
tracii: trabaie să-l schimbăm  
pe A: trabaie: trabaie: trabaie să-l  
schimbăm pe B: trabaie: trabaie  
să-l schimbăm pe C: victor bra-  
mar: il faut commença: la 2-aste  
lui meu abșitai răsunător.

ILARIE VORONCA

## AEVEA

SI SANGE SI NEBUNIE  
VEACURI SI ALBE MARI  
CREDINTI SI  
CADAVERICE PARFUMURI  
Meari Tăceti Necunoscut  
și UMBRE... UMBRE...  
O frunte și sânge pe spini de aur  
HEARELY CALIMACHI

Construire  
Construire  
Construire  
Détruire  
Détruire  
Rien  
Rien



CONSTANTIN BRÂNCUȘI

La littérature a besoin d'injections frigorifiques 'dH 75 HP.  
CIII CONTIMPORANUL Peintres steppez sur vos toiles



ARTA E UN CASTRAVETE  
TOȚI ARTIȘTI SÎNT CASTRAȚI

MIGUEL DONVILLE

Citiți

no 10

PROECTIL  
MODERNIST **unu**

**PE FRONT**

ilarie voronca  
claudesernet  
stephane roll  
sașa pană  
moldov  
al. marius  
f. lumbroso  
george bogza

D m. h. maxy  
E  
S marc chagall  
E  
N  
E victor brauner

**VESTIAR**

BIBLIOGRAFIE - CALENDAR - DELICTE - CATAPULT - unu LA TRIBUNAL

1929 FEBRUARIE

LEI 3

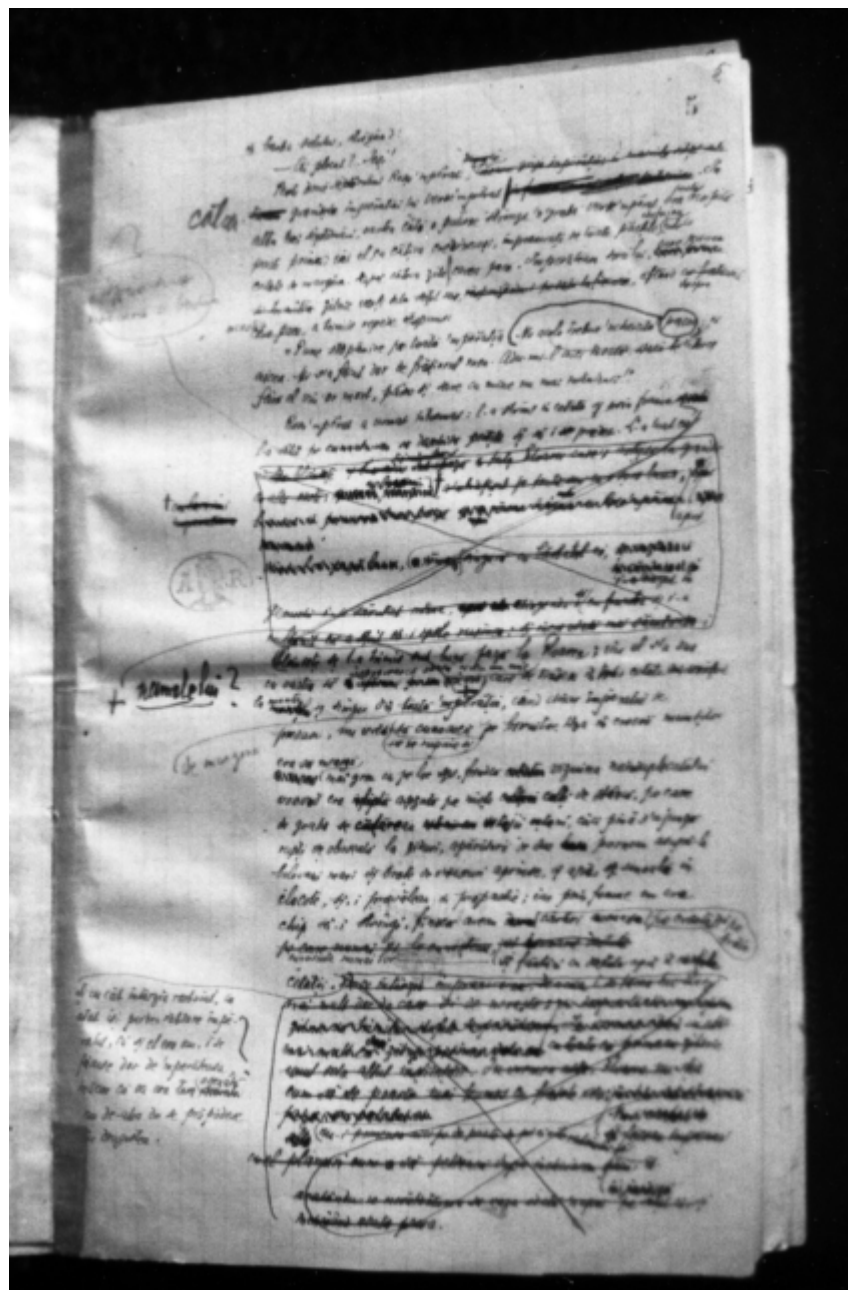
Certainly, Michael H. Impey says, Morgenstern's witty, mordant pages alone would not account for some of Tzara's stranger flights of fancy, especially in regard to the fragmentary sketches of his alter ego Hamlet, which seem to walk a tightrope between sanity and madness. How strange and how ironic, Impey says, indirectly referring to the relationship between Urmuz, Ion Luca Caragiale, and Eugène Ionesco, how strange and how ironic if it should be proved that France owed the germination of two of its most portentous literary currents—Dada/surrealism and the theater of the absurd—to the grotesqueries of a simple, unpretentious Romanian court clerk.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the most authorized confirmation of Urmuz's importance for Zurich Dada is made by one of those involved in the latter from the very first day: Marcel Iancu. Referring to Urmuz in an interview with the Romanian scholar Victor Bârlădeanu, he says that he himself and Tristan Tzara transferred to Zurich a revolt characteristic of the social and cultural climate in Romania, an atmosphere full of intense humor and permeated by a certain amount of absurdism.<sup>53</sup>

The Romanian context is also surprising in another equally unnoticed respect as the link between Urmuz, Dada, and French modernism. If, for instance, Hugo Ball read Marinetti already before the outbreak of the war in 1914 and corresponded with the Italian futurist one year later, when he also received Marinetti's *Parole in libertà*, according to Ball "just letters of the alphabet on a page" where the syntax has come apart and where the letters are scattered and assembled again in a rough-and-ready way without any language anymore,<sup>54</sup> well, then—as mentioned before—Alexandru Macedonski had already been published in Marinetti's *Poesia*. It is evident also that one of the clerks at the supreme court of appeal in Bucharest was both informed and inspired by Italian futurism, despite the fact that Urmuz did not have any direct and immediate contacts with the European avant-garde as such. The bizarre pages recall in many respects some of the fundamental futurist principles in regard to, for instance, the more or less free use of words and construction of sentences within a seemingly uninterrupted flow of visions, which, according to Eva Behring, seems also to forebode surrealist automatic writing.<sup>55</sup> In the same year as Tristan Tzara, the Iancu brothers, and Arthur Segal engaged themselves in the activities at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Urmuz mentioned the name of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his "school" to one of his colleagues at the court, while in the manuscript including the

FIGURE 9.8

Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău's  
manuscript. The Romanian Academy.



stories about Ismail and Turnavitu, Emil Gayk, and Algazy and Grummer, today in the archives of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest,<sup>56</sup> he suggests a hypothetical title: “Schițe și nuvele—aproape futuriste” (Sketches and novellas—almost futuristic).

The fact that futurism was exceedingly present in the Romanian context is shown also, for instance, by the fact that Marinetti himself intended to visit Bucharest as early as 1912,<sup>57</sup> the same year in which *Simbolul* was published, and especially by the highly astonishing fact that the first futurist manifesto was published in the newspaper *Democrația*<sup>58</sup> in Craiova on the very same day—20 February 1909—as French readers were able to read it in *Le Figaro*. A few months later, on 14 June, the manifesto was published in the journal *Biblioteca modernă* as well, a journal that has been described as a kind of futurist affiliate that would publish all the manifestos of Marinetti’s partisans during 1910–1912.<sup>59</sup> Its readers were introduced to such texts as Marinetti’s futurist novel *Mafarka il futurista*, originally published in 1909, and the poetic demonstrations by Enrico Cavacchioli, G. P. Lucini, and Paolo Buzzi, at the same time as works by the major painters Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, and Severini were reproduced in, for instance, the widely read magazine *Universul literar*. The first futurist manifesto was also made known in Transylvania in February by the magazine *Țara noastră*, which, however, warned the readers of some “exaggerations” and criticized Marinetti for his misogyny. In July parts of the manifesto and in October the entire manifesto were published in Ion Minulescu’s *Viitorul*; this time the translation was far better than the one published in *Democrația* and *Biblioteca modernă*. According to Minulescu, contemporary poets run an evident risk of being stricken with “the damp atmosphere of the horrid dungeons” as long as they are not able to break the chains confining the old poetic forms. At the same time *Democrația* in Craiova continued to direct its spotlight at futurism; in June the magazine paid attention to Cavacchioli’s book *Le ranocchie turchine, col manifesto del futurismo* and Paolo Buzzi’s new collection of poems *Aeroplani*.<sup>60</sup> Thus, it is hardly surprising when Marcel Iancu, in connection with Marinetti’s long-awaited and at last realized visit to Bucharest in 1930, declared that “futurism was our own school. Its symbols strengthened us all, we were nourished by its ideas and empowered to be enthusiastic.”<sup>61</sup>

What made it possible to publish the first manifesto in Romania the same day it was published in Paris? *Democrația* was founded in May 1908 by a group of lawyers and other intellectuals in Craiova, of whom the writer, journalist, composer, and

painter Mihail Drăgănescu was the most active.<sup>62</sup> Almost every issue contained summaries of and references to Marinetti's journal *Poesia*; Drăgănescu also kept Marinetti constantly informed of this "free publicity" in Romania. The newspaper in Craiova had the manifesto flanked by both the short accompanying letter that Marinetti attached to it, in which he asked for comments and promised to publish them in *Poesia*, and the long and eloquent answer written by Drăgănescu, according to whom there were some parts in the "incendiary" manifesto with which he couldn't fully agree, at the same time as he politely and collegially said that he admired Marinetti's will to refresh the arts, "burying the passive and sick immobility" of contemporary poetry. Explicitly Drăgănescu couldn't agree with Marinetti's demands to burn the libraries and free the world from the museums, demands he described as peculiar for the Romanians, living in a country with almost no libraries and no museums, a country just recently liberated from the Ottoman and Phanariot yokes and which simply hadn't had time to develop its own art capable of attracting attention in the far Western countries, while the few known artists that Romania had succeeded in producing had been forced to move abroad because of "vulgar envy" and lack of interest at home. Romania had no museum-cemeteries because the country had nothing to bury yet, while the whole country was a cemetery filled with ignored, scattered, and lost historical sources capable of telling about the life and culture of the forefathers. Indeed, Drăgănescu is upset on behalf of the Romanian people, but adds for safety's sake that this is not the right occasion to shed tears. Indeed,

*we need energy and courage. We must not lose ourselves in the Oriental opium sleep that predisposes us to ecstasy and laziness. We need action, we must follow you, because we—the Oriental Latins—are of the same blood as you, Western Latins, because we derive our origin from ancient Rome, because we love our people, because we are patriots. . . .*

*Indeed, art must not sleep in museums and academic libraries. The dead smelling of rotten corpses are sleeping in the burial grounds. We, the living, must prove that we exist, creating new, viable songs encouraging and curing not those who are fat, not the dead, but those living in ignorance, those tired of working in either your arsenals, cities, and factories or in our agricultural fields, both now*

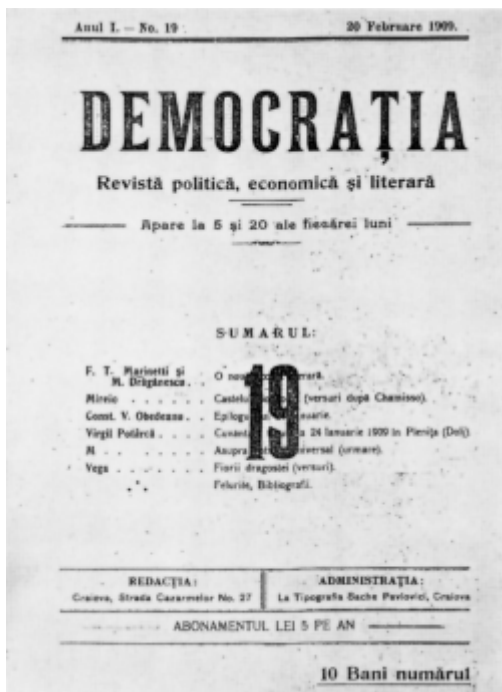


FIGURE 9.9

*Democrația*, 20 February 1909.



FIGURE 9.10

*Le Figaro*, 20 February 1909.

*and in the future. "Yesterday" is an old thing, a thing come to an end, as useless as a dead person; our inspiration must come from the needs of today and tomorrow, the time in which we live and shall live in the future. . . .*

*Therefore, let us work feverishly, because we must work; let us move, because everything is moving in the universe. And let us do this without craving the glory of the academies, useless to the starving human being exhausted by the stifling smoke of the dark factories as well as to the worker not yet enlightened by the new rising society. Let us work and fight against the stars not satisfying the appetite of the oppressed.<sup>63</sup>*

In other words, Drăgănescu was in principle able to embrace Marinetti's notion of and demands for revolutionary action in the arts, but couldn't agree upon his specific demands for destruction, his "love of total freedom," as Drăgănescu said, because this would deprive poetry of its own beauty and independence. In short, Drăgănescu couldn't join the new school, because it glorified war, cruelty, hatred, injustice, and anarchy.

As soon as the scandalous manifesto had been published, the response in Romania was extremely intense, futurism being lively discussed not only in specialized magazines and journals but in the big daily newspapers as well.<sup>64</sup> The Romanian context was also very much up to date in regard to Marinetti himself, his poetic efforts, and the cultural background from which he stepped forth as one of the most important representatives of "Latin" symbolism (referring to both Italian and French sources). Marinetti's symbolist poetry was, for the most part, characterized by Parisian symbolism, the same milieu to which the Romanian symbolists were drawn, among them Macedonski, who had even succeeded in publishing his collection of poems *Bronzes* in French with a French publishing company in 1897.<sup>65</sup> By the end of the 1890s Marinetti had frequently contributed to symbolist journals like *La plume* and *Revue blanche* and toured in both France and Italy, reading, among others, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Verhaeren, all of whom were energetically discussed in Bucharest as well. At the same time he became the friend of the poet and Orientalist Gustav Kahn, one of the pioneers of free verse, the absurdist Alfred Jarry,

and the “unanimistic” mystics Jules Romain, Alexandre Mercereau, and Charles Vidrac. Marinetti’s literary debut, *La conquête des étoiles* in 1902, is also characterized by symbolistically intoxicated, heavy, voluptuous metaphors piled up in baroque abundance. Emile Verhaeren was responsible for opening Marinetti’s eyes to the beauty of the modern mechanized city, while the Italian poet was radicalized by his contacts with Kahn; already his second collection of poems, *Déstruction*, published in 1904, contains a complimentary poem to the locomotive, “the demon of speed,” as well as an “anthem to death.” In the same year as he published his first futurist manifesto, Marinetti published his satirical play *Le roi Bombance* as well, according to himself a political tragedy in four acts jauntily paraphrasing Jarry’s *Ubu roi*; here Marinetti openly pokes fun at the pitiful conditions of man, the bigoted and conservative church, the conceited royal court, mendacious parliamentarism, and solely materialistic socialism, targets familiar to the Romanian avant-gardists as well.

As editor of the journal *Papyrus*, published in his hometown of Alexandria in 1894–1896, Marinetti had been politically anti-anarchist and pro-tsarist, artistically an admirer of the Pre-Raphaelites and of Ruskin. Characteristically of the nationalistic Romanian context—paradoxically enough in regard to both his future development and his political conservatism—Marinetti was first noticed in Romania when the symbolist poet Ovid Densusianu declared in his journal *Viața nouă* that the Italian poet brought forward a “nonpatriotic attitude.” Otherwise the reception of Marinetti’s poetry was extremely positive, with frequent references to *Poesia*, which had begun to circulate in Bucharest by around 1906. In that year, for instance, the magazine *Românul literar* introduced Marinetti’s latest poems and defined him as “one of the most prominent poets in contemporary Italy.” According to the Romanian literary scholar Mihaela Schiopu, the intellectuals in Bucharest were obviously curious about Marinetti, eagerly waiting for something new. For instance, the journal *Universul literar* introduced thoroughly *La conquête des étoiles* and *Déstruction* and paid special attention to the use of free verse, even wishing that Marinetti would visit Bucharest: “Clever and adventurous, he surely will come up with something,” the poet Smara wrote, “because everyone knows that the Latin heart may evoke great and distinct poetic passions.” (Marinetti answered that he would be more than pleased to



study the ethnological, political, and intellectual circumstances in Romania but that his time was too short to visit the beautiful country in the very near future.)<sup>66</sup>

The fact that Marinetti personally knew several Romanian intellectuals already long before he launched his futurism is shown also by the fact that he dedicated many of his early collections and books to Romanians, among them the journalist Panait Mușoiu, Elena Văcărescu, and the “queen poet” Carmen Sylva; he must also have known the Countess de Noailles’s Romanian origin when dedicating to her the collection of poems *La ville charnelle*, published in 1908.<sup>67</sup> In other words, it is hardly surprising that both the French *Le Figaro* and the Romanian *Democrația* were the first to publish Marinetti’s manifesto. The fact that the manifesto was published on the very same day might be a coincidence, if Marinetti hadn’t asked for a particular day of publication in the accompanying letter to all the editorial offices all over Europe to which he sent the epoch-making manifesto.

If *Democrația* presented Marinetti as “the master of Italian-French poetry” and editor of the internationally known magazine *Poesia*, he was defined by *Biblioteca modernă* as a poet known in all the Latin countries and as the author of the “famous manifesto”; the manifesto was accompanied there both by Mihail Drăgănescu’s answer and by Grandi’s imposing portrait of Marinetti published in Tullio Panteo’s book *Il poeta Marinetti*, which the editorial offices of both *Democrația* and *Biblioteca modernă* had received the year before. The latter also translated into Romanian Marinetti’s rather symbolist and definitely nonfuturist poem “Le ranocchie turchine” in its next issue and published Marinetti’s essay on D’Annunzio in August, which the author himself had sent to the magazine promising that the editors would receive an issue of *Poesia* if the essay was published.

The Romanian daily newspapers too reacted unusually quickly on the publication of the first futurist manifesto. *Adevărul* complained that the realistic ideals once inspiring writers such as Tolstoy, Taine, and Ibsen didn’t seem to be valid in the West anymore, while *Viitorul* expressed an unqualified admiration for both *Poesia* and Marinetti, according to the newspaper an “unusual man,” at the same time describing *Le roi Bombance* as a “courageous” piece, a “true and deep lecture about our society,” and Marinetti’s poetry as a true “cry against snobbery.”<sup>68</sup> Pertinent also is the fact that the Romanian newspapers published one tearful report after another about the Wright brothers and Blériot at the same time as anarchism, socialism, and German

expressionism were on the top of the agenda of both the avant-gardists and the intellectual establishment, even though the latter—of course—condemned sharply the priorities of the former. The journal *Versuri și proză* considered futurism a revolutionary current uniting literary and political ideals: futurism is a literature full of enthusiasm and courage, an urge and an effort to find new motifs and refreshing and exciting perspectives in a world of conventional images and fixed frameworks—the poet is no longer the romantic prophet but instead the modern propagandist mediating new political messages.

Indeed, Marinetti became a cause célèbre in Romania almost immediately after the publication of the first manifesto. The journal *Ramuri*, for instance, gave a detailed account of the trial in Milan against Marinetti, who was charged with sexual offense in 1910 because of *Mafarka*, whose main character is armed with a sexual organ measuring up to eleven meters. *Biblioteca modernă* reported meticulously on the futurist manifestos and the activities in Rome and Milan; the pseudonymous Ozric—the responsible editor of the journal, Vasile Alecsandrescu—told in detail, for instance, of the manifesto of the futurist painters signed by Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, and Severini, according to which the futurists must furiously fight against the fanatic, unconscious, and snobbish culture of the past. One year later Alecsandrescu also commented on the verdict against Marinetti in the trial occasioned by *Mafarka* and declared that he was deeply touched by the author's "intellectual heroism and warlike nationalism," though the verdict was to be expected because those remaining old-fashioned always hound whatever is new, in the same way as Jesus was crucified by those fighting against new ideas; Marinetti had his own Pilate in the chairman of the court.

The notion of *Biblioteca modernă* being a kind of a futurist affiliate in Central and Eastern Europe is confirmed also by the fact that the journal published the manifesto of the futurist dramatists in 1911, the same year as it was made public in Parma. The journal published not only comments of its own but also essays and articles by foreign writers and journalists, for instance Camille Mauclair's essay on futurism and the "young Italy." One year later Marinetti's absolutely fresh technical manifesto of futurist literature was published as well, according to which syntax must be destroyed and the adjective abolished to let the naked noun keep its color, since the adjective with its nuances is inconsistent with dynamic vision. Marinetti called also for

the obliteration of the self in literature, which must have been attractive not only to Tristan Tzara but to the rest of the future dadaists as well, as will be shown. According to Nicolae Davidescu in *Nouă revista română*, it was a matter of a justified revolt against “contemporary banalities and imitations” and at the same time an expression of “our amazingly modern life built upon human pride, steel, and breakneck speed.”<sup>69</sup>

The manifest and sometimes violent futurist presence in Romanian cultural life provoked reactions, of course, though the counterattacks indirectly contributed to futurist publicity and “marketing” and the feeling that Romania had special links to Latin cultures in the middle of Europe, something that would have a determining effect when the Romanian avant-garde seriously began attacking the establishment just after the war. Thus, Ovid Densusianu, for instance, would appreciatively refer to the futurists’ attacks on the cult of the past at the same time as he explicitly rejected the “barbarian” way in which they carried out their program. Thus also the generally avant-garde-friendly journal *Flacăra* would accuse Marinetti of being the autocratic high priest of futurism, a laughable figure tilting against windmills, while, for instance, the journal *Universul literar* ridiculed futurist literature and art and called the futurists a gang of “bandits.” Futurism was also, of course, accused of being snobbish, illiterate, and monkish.

According to the Romanian literary scholar Ion Pop, this criticism, however, differed from the conservative, traditional one, since it reveals the extent to which Marinetti’s and the rest of the futurists’ ideas were in fact known and discussed in the Romanian literary and artistic milieu, which provided room for nuanced opinions as well.<sup>70</sup> According to Pop, we must not forget that the years just before the war saw Romanian literature through Adrian Maniu, Tristan Tzara, and Ion Vinea seriously leaving symbolism behind and beginning to move toward a pre-avant-gardist modernism, a modernism taking shape in journals like *Seara*, *Nouă revista română*, and *Cronica*. It is characteristic of the situation, for instance, that Adrian Maniu writes about “the futurist spring” in 1914, and that Tristan Tzara is leaving symbolism at the same time in order to deconstruct the images and metaphors of traditional literature while injecting his poetry with more or less banal and trivial elements of everyday life. Already the titles of poems such as “Insomnie,” “Dumineca,” “Tristeța casnică,” “Îndoieli,” and “Se spînzură un om,” all of which refer to everyday things not usual in traditional poetry—sleeplessness, doubts, sadness at home, a man hanging himself—are, ac-

according to Marin Mincu, consciously built upon bad taste and try to ridicule the poetry of the contemporary imitators of Eminescu.<sup>71</sup> And didn't Marinetti explain in the technical manifesto of futurist literature that there were no fixed categories among metaphors, that metaphors are neither noble nor cheap, elegant nor vulgar, eccentric nor natural? And hadn't Urmuz already put into practice this nonhierarchical order filled with one absurd sally after the other?



IN THE  
**Romanian**  

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**VILLAGE**

10



It is not particularly difficult to recognize the tones of old folksongs, fairy tales, and popular legends in both Samuel Rosenstock's and Tristan Tzara's early poems. According to Serge Fauchereau, the fact that both Romanian literature in general and the popular culture in particular contain an absurd streak supports the idea that Tzara had studied at least some of Urmuz's stories,<sup>1</sup> Urmuz himself being near to the old tales and legends. It is also interesting that Marcel Janco, confirming that he and Tzara had transferred to Zurich a revolt characteristic of the social and cultural climate of Romania, explained that this atmosphere full of intense humor and permeated by a certain amount of absurdism can be recognized also in certain popular stories and tales, as well as in naive peasant painting.<sup>2</sup> And wasn't Arthur Segal too inspired by the more than four-hundred-year-old church paintings in Ascona, Lugano, and Bellinzona, which strongly reminded him of the "primitive" and decidedly narrative fifteenth-century frescoes in and on the Moldavian churches in, for instance, Voroneț, Gura Humorului, and Moldovița?<sup>3</sup>

In fact, there are few Romanian scholars, writers, or poets who do not take pride in the elements of absurdism, jokes, and satirical attacks within popular tradition. Thus, for instance, according to Dumitru Drăghicescu in 1907, a "rich and superior intelligence," merged with remainders of pragmatic spirit inherited from the Romans, have given the Romanians a sarcastic spirit and their natural talent for mocking and satirizing. The blend of pragmatism and the resourcefulness, refinement, and natural liveliness of the Romanians' spirit, Drăghicescu says, have given birth to "the wonderful, admirable and abundant" satirical literature of mocking anecdotes, piercing stories and jokes, and biting epigrams.<sup>4</sup>

The absurd—or rather absurdist—and fantastic tradition is also decisively present in Romanian "bourgeois" literature. Already Mihai Eminescu was inspired by popular legends and songs when he consciously violated time and space according to an abnormal and disintegrated logic within the extraordinary.<sup>5</sup> For instance, he could combine different magical elements from popular poetry with Oriental initiation rites, astrology, hypnosis, and cosmic metamorphosis: side by side live "Moorish," starred kings, "black savages," and magical shamans with their heads covered with wolf skin and their shoulders with bearskin. A few decades before the turn of the century Ion Creangă, for instance, wrote several miraculous stories full of grotesqueries and illogical surprises directly linked to the folkloric tradition, which was one of the

most important points of departure for the novelist Mihail Sadoveanu as well, to mention only a few of those writers inspired by popular mysteries and absurdism.

Perhaps the best known of those inspired by popular culture is also the most famous of all Romanian artists, namely Constantin Brâncuși, romantically described as the prototype of the Romanian peasant, sympathetic, ancient, strong, unpredictable, and wise like a wizard.<sup>6</sup> Although Brâncuși would belong to the cosmopolitan and ultramodern avant-garde in Paris almost immediately after his arrival in the French capital in 1904, he never lost contact with his native country and the peasant culture in which he had grown up in the village of Hobița on the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, where his father Ion Brâncuși worked both as a farmer and as the village carpenter, building several of the churches in the region. In fact Brâncuși transformed his own home and studio in Paris into a piece of Romania, he himself dressing like a Romanian farmer in simple cotton trousers and shirt, in winter in a long black cloak and cap, which, according to the Baroness Frachon, made him look like a Carpathian shepherd. He furnished his studio with wooden furniture made by himself, among other things a big table with an enormous stone slab and a primitive fireplace recalling those in Oltenian villages. It is certainly true that he possessed a telephone, but nobody saw him using it, instead he used to throw sand on the neighboring windows when he needed help. The smell in the studio was described as sour-sweet, as in certain homes in the country, maybe because of the milk turning into yogurt in the corridor. Brâncuși used also to treat his guests to an excellent, typically Romanian dinner of sauerkraut, pickled gherkin, polenta, and grilled meat, almost always lamb, and, according to Man Ray, small glasses of Romanian firewater, i.e., *tuica*, vodka made of plums. Brâncuși was also an excellent player and singer of old Romanian folksongs as soon as there was an opportunity, often with a strong tone of homesickness, although he never seriously considered exchanging Paris for its Romanian copy. Brâncuși visited Romania eight times before World War II, took part in a great number of exhibitions, planned the Petre Stănescu monument in Buzău in 1907, carried out the big installation in Târgu-Jiu in 1938 with the gate of kisses, the endless column, and the table of silence, and surrounded himself in Paris with several Romanian artists and intellectuals, among them Benjamin Fundoianu, George Enescu, Theodor Pallady, Camil Ressu, Nicolae Dărescu, Panait Istrati, Traian Vuia,



Maria Bengescu, Otilia Cosmuța, and later Eugène Ionesco, Emil Cioran, and Paul Celan as well.

Brâncuși himself said that he worked the way the shoemaker made shoes and the baker baked bread, like any craftsman, without worrying about the hierarchical distinctions among fine art, handicraft, and applied art. According to Fundoianu, Brâncuși worked like any other “primitive and savage man,” like a bricklayer, a laborer, a plumber, a chimney sweep, or a mechanic in direct and immediate contact with his material. According to the art historian Edith Balas, his relationship to the material was animistic, almost in the same way as the Romanian peasants, in spite of the church’s condemnation, kept their old pagan and in many respects pantheistic faith, a natural faith showing special respect for the “inner life” of the material and which is also shown in Brâncuși’s notion of an omnipotent cosmic balance present in all things and beings.<sup>7</sup>

Brâncuși also took a well-attested and deep interest in Romanian folktales, legends, and stories, as well as in contemporary poetry inspired by folkloric elements; his bookshelf in Paris was filled with old tales and works by well-known folklorists and writers inspired by the Romanian peasant culture, for instance Eminescu, Creangă, and Demian Teodorescu. Brâncuși grew up in an environment still strongly characterized by the old popular religious faith, in which folktales were an intimately integrated element; he himself, in his years at the school of crafts and design in Craiova just before the turn of the century, had carved and made *turca* masks, puppets, and decorated wooden stars for the *colinde* celebrations in the region. In the villages, the tales, often containing elements as old as the ancient Roman monuments or obvious Oriental influences, were the more popular the more remarkable and more fantastic and “absurd” they were, often inhabited by one peculiar animal after another, real or imaginary birds, beasts, and insects, often appearing to be human beings in the guise of an animal, never following any law of nature or any other rational explanation.

According to Mircea Eliade, the meeting with the Parisian avant-garde and its interest in “primitive” African and archaic Mediterranean art brought about an “internalization” in Brâncuși, a return to a secret and unforgettable world, at the same time the world of his own childhood and a fantasy world.<sup>8</sup> Clearly his art is linked to Romanian popular mythology; sometimes his works even have Romanian

titles taken from popular legends and tales, like *Maiastra*. One may discern not only a structural and morphological connection to Romanian popular art but also certain analogies to African art and to artistic forms of both the Mediterranean and the Carpathian and Danube regions during prehistoric ages. It is characteristic, for instance, that Brâncuși in the endless column rediscovers a motif common in Romanian folklore, namely the “pillar of heaven” or *columna cerului* carrying the vault of heaven and which therefore can be described also as a kind of *axis mundi*, common in German and North Asian mythology as well. In Romanian folklore the pillar of heaven is linked to an archaic, pre-Christian belief later integrated with the *colinde* festival. The pillar is an integrated part of the symbolics of elevation and ascension, flying or transcendence, which in turn in Romanian folklore are linked to the bird as a leading theme, a theme that inspired Brâncuși from his first version of *Maiastra* in 1912, in which he elaborated the motif of *pasărea maiastra*, the enchanted bird helping the fair youth Fat Frumos in his trials and struggles.

When Mircea Eliade formulates his theory of Brâncuși “internalizing” and sinking down into Romanian popular art and thinking and at the same time into African and Mediterranean archaic art, he also notes that “internalization” and “sinking down” into the depths of something were central elements of the zeitgeist of the early twentieth century. Sigmund Freud had quite recently specified his technique of investigating the unconscious depths of the human psyche, while his colleague Carl Gustav Jung believed in reaching still deeper into the so-called collective unconsciousness. The cave explorer Emil Racovița was on his way to identifying “living fossils” in the fauna of the caves, according to Eliade so much more peculiar as these organic forms could not be fossilized. At the same time Lucien Lévy-Bruhl isolated an archaic, pre-logical phase of human thinking in the “primitive mentality.” In Romania an entire nation was built, for the most part, by digging down and inward into what was defined as the Romanian people and the common past of the Romanian nation in Greek and Roman antiquity, while other parts of this building consisted of sounding out the depths of the “primitive” peasant culture, where the original village community was defined as the true kernel of the nation, its sound and always beating heart. For instance, the leader of the peasant party Ion Mihalache proclaimed that the farming population out in the villages formed a compact unity, the country’s only

homogeneous class, while Nicolae Iorga protested just after the peasant rebellion in 1907 against the boyars' pretensions of having owned the land since ancient times by evoking the idea of an ancient village community in which the boyar was on an equal footing with everybody else, in the same way as Mihail Sadoveanu evoked the notion of an archaic world where the farmers and the landlords were free men with equal rights. Samanatorism and poporanism pointed in the same direction, defining Romania's national characteristic as love for the village and the farmer, the same farmer and the same village that writers such as Constantin Sandu-Aldea, Octavian Goga, and Ștefan O. Iosif described as the authentic man and the idyllic place of birth of the nation and the people, permeated by deep popular mysticism, at the same time as Constantin Stere, for instance, propagandized for a kind of original peasant socialism instead of Marxism. A few years later Lucian Blaga would speak of the "Mioritian space," deriving from the well-known popular ballad "Miorita" about the little lamb preferring death instead of fighting. According to Blaga, the Romanian people lives in this space characterized by both the notion of justice and the feeling of honor of the old peasant culture and of nature itself.

According to Eliade, Brâncuși was contemporary with the movement manifested in Paris toward "internalization" and investigation of the "depths," as well as the more or less passionate interest in "primitive," prehistoric, and prerational phases of human creativity. So too were the dadaists in Zurich with their "negro songs" and their interest in "primitive" art and "primitive" cultural modes of expression, a latent interest that seems to have flowered as soon as Richard Huelsenbeck joined the company at Cabaret Voltaire bringing with him his most important instruments, a drumstick and a kettledrum with the help of which he had beaten his "negro rhythms" in Berlin before the war together with Hugo Ball. With Huelsenbeck Zurich Dada became also more provocative, as he stood on the small stage with his wild blond forelock, waving with his bamboo cane while reading or "singing" poems from, for instance, his own *Phantastische Gebete*, published in 1916, as if they were pure and naked defamations.

Huelsenbeck transformed his performances into true attacks against all and everything and finished every *Negergedicht* with the refrain "Umba, Umba." According to Ball, two-thirds of "the wonderful plaintive words that no human mind can resist" came from ancient magical texts.<sup>9</sup> Ball says also that the dadaists' common way of

writing poetry was characterized by the use of “grammalogues,” of magical floating words and resonant sounds, word images irresistibly and hypnotically engraved on the memory, from which they emerge again with just a little resistance and friction. Thus, Huelsenbeck appeared on the stage in the company of both Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco already on 29 March 1916 with a “poème simultané,” according to Ball a “contrapunctal recitative” in which three or more voices spoke, sang, and whistled at the same time in such a way that the elegiac, humorous, or bizarre content of the piece was brought out by these combinations.<sup>10</sup> The simultaneous poem was followed by two “negro songs,” especially prepared and performed in a Vehmic costume of black cowls and with big and small exotic drums to a melody composed by the host Jan Ephraim, who had been involved in African business, eagerly helping with the performance like an “instructive and stimulating prima donna.” The poem “La Pauke” in *Phantastische Gebete* is an excellent example of Huelsenbeck’s engagement in the contemporary current of interest in “primitive” cultural expressions and African exoticism:

*aus der eeeeeer dee steisteisteisteisteigt kuuuuuuuugeln  
do ooooooorort wo oo dieie klarinetten wa a a achsen  
aus dem in nee ee eee eren stei eigt kugeln an die ooberfläää ääche  
negergrigrigrigriiiiillen in den woooooo lkeee en  
ich zereieieieieisse den hüüüüüüüüüüüüüüüüüü  
gel den tepiii ii iii ich ich mache  
eine grooooooooooße pauaaaaaauke  
niicht meine teeechnintes un ayayayay  
tagaa a aaaaan insomnia ninia  
iaoi xixixixi xixi cla cla clo  
drrrrrrr rrrr<sup>11</sup>*

Only a few months later Hugo Ball too went exotic as he entered the stage of Zunfthaus zur Waag on 14 July dressed in Marcel Janco’s “bishop’s costume” and performed his famous *Lautgedichte*, the onomatopoeic “Gadji beri bimba” and “Karawane,” of which the latter originally was titled “Zug der Elefanten”:

jolifanto bambla o falli bambla  
grossiga m'pfa habla horem  
égiga goramen  
higo bloiko russula huju  
hollaka hollola  
anlogo bung  
blago bung blago bung  
bosso fataka  
ü üü ü  
schampa wulla wussa olobo  
hej tatta gorem  
eschige zunbada  
wulubu ssubudu uluwu ssubudu  
tumba ba-umf  
kusa gauma  
ba-umf<sup>12</sup>

The examples are legion of the dadaists' "internalization" and sinking down into "primitive" art and literature, and there is every reason to believe that particularly the Romanians at Cabaret Voltaire were involved as well, though it is hard to point at any direct specific links instead of implicit connections and contexts. Thus Tristan Tzara himself, who very seldom if ever directly or explicitly revealed his sources of inspiration or his motivations, explained in his introduction to the new edition of Tristan Corbière's *Les amours jaunes*, which so evidently had influenced him in his youth, that Corbière would never have considered the words uttered in the communicative act between people as ridiculous or laughable or as criminal instruments, had he not seen signs of it in primitive cultures and folklore which had remained pure and had he not loved people for what they were, people who in their popular modes of expression didn't have anything else to give than themselves.<sup>13</sup> Regarding Marcel Janco, Harry Seiwert tries to argue on both sides when he defines van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Derain, Cimabue, El Greco, the French "cloisonnists," futurism, cubism, and postimpressionism, almost obligatory in Romania, as the most important sources of inspiration of Janco's painting, along with African, Egyptian,

Chinese, Japanese, and Indian art, and claims, paradoxically enough, that Janco's art is European and not oriented toward Romania and that it has totally other roots than that of his countrymen—though he adds that Janco “of course” came in touch with Romanian popular art in his youth, so that his feeling for artistic forms would benefit from certain characteristics of popular art. Seiwert makes it also perhaps too easy for himself when, hunting for arguments, he refers to the lack of popular motifs in Janco's art, with the exception of a painting from 1930 of an old countrywoman carrying a basket of eggs; yet he takes one step back when, still with obvious reservations, he says that the strong colors and marked contours may be explained by Janco's knowledge of popular woodcuts, in the same way as the shallow depth of the picture plane may indicate that the painter is inspired by certain elements of popular art. Characteristically enough Seiwert avoids specifying the popular art to which he refers, while, speaking of Janco's masks, he refers to Fernand Léger's “tubism.”<sup>14</sup>

Especially in regard to the masks, Seiwert's many reservations are difficult to understand, unless the reservations are to be considered as some kind of a “rescue of honor” of Janco from his own biographical and cultural points of departure and thus a confirmation of his central position in the Western avant-garde, at the risk of making the time before Zurich a kind of tabula rasa without any significance for Janco's artistic development or for dadaism in general, which in turn runs the risk of reducing Janco's role in Zurich. One cannot rule out that Janco—like Tristan Tzara—in his meeting with Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, Hans Arp, Marcel Slodki, and the other future dadaists at the Meierei went through a process of internalization and diving into the depths of cultures and psyche similar to the one Brâncuși had experienced in Paris meeting with the French avant-garde; this is even almost confirmed by the masks and the costumes, and by the “primitive” way in which Janco was engaged in the activities on the Dada stage.

An evident yet unnoticed association in the cultural background of the Romanians at Cabaret Voltaire was a central phenomenon of the Romanian peasant culture, exceedingly alive at the turn of the century, namely the *colinde* festival,<sup>15</sup> celebrated every year mainly around Christmas and New Year, especially in Moldavia and northern Bukovina but also in the Carpathian Mountains in Transylvania and in the villages on the Danube plain in Wallachia. According to the Romanian ethnographer

Gheorghe Vrăbie, the term *colinde* derives from the Latin *calendae* and the Greek *kanávdai* as a phenomenon going back to the Roman *saturnalia* and the *festum calendarum*, a festival that slaves and poor children celebrated in January by walking from house to house wishing people good luck and prosperity and receiving money or food in return.<sup>16</sup> The tradition, also linked to ancient fertility rites to protect the future harvest, was not specifically Romanian but was found in local variants also in Poland, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Croatia. However, the tradition was unusually deep-rooted and original among peasants living near the Danube and in the Carpathian Mountains thanks to their isolation, which together with the delayed modernization of Romania contributed to the fact that the old peasant communities maintained their customs and structures more or less independent of the development of the rest of the society far into the twentieth century.

The most important element, besides the different plays with stock characters performed at the festival, was the so-called *colinde* songs which were performed with a melodic refrain and which were almost always improvised (though the participants might consult books of accompanying text used by several generations). The festival was celebrated mostly around Christmas, New Year, Easter, and Pentecost, but the most important days seem to have been Christmas Eve and Palm Sunday. Many, perhaps most of the festivals were linked to the winter solstice, when the arrival of the sun was celebrated, and can be interpreted as a kind of initiation rite and rebirth, a step into a new social category from adolescence to adulthood, since the satirical and strongly popular plot of these folkloric plays without either director or stage settings, characterized by black and unrestrained humor, was carried out by thirty to fifty young boys, all dressed up in different ways to represent grotesque figures. One source tells of a company in a village just outside Iași in 1885 that consisted of more than fifty boys marching from house to house shouting and roaring, some of the boys carrying torches and lamps, others carrying trumpets and drums. The “gay” company performed a comical and satirical play, after which one of the boys stepped forward to dance, sing, and wish good luck and prosperity. In 1911 more than forty persons took part in the spectacle in a village in Moldavia, the masks uncounted.

The *colinde* festival usually started with the group of young boys selecting a leader, whose face was often rubbed with charcoal. A testimony from the Oltului region in 1869 reports that the company had a specific house in the village at its

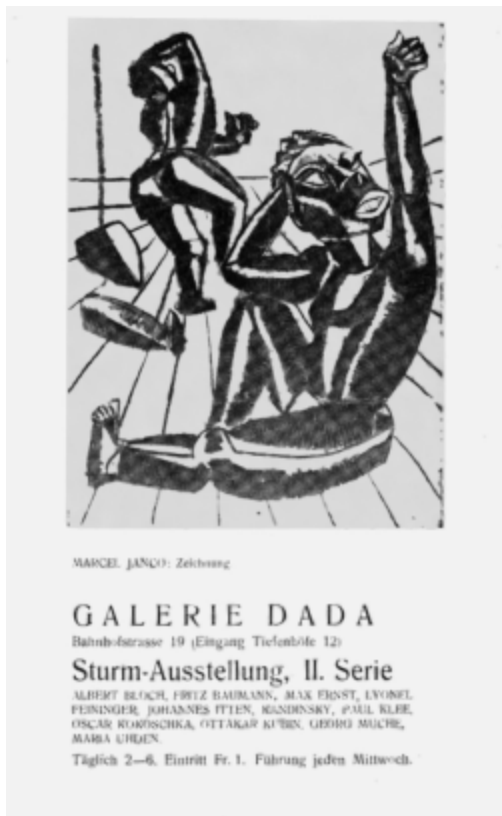


FIGURE 10.1

Poster, Galerie Dada, Zurich,

April 1917, with drawing by

Marcel Janco.



FIGURE 10.2

Marcel Janco, *Mask*, 1919 (?).

© Marcel Janco/BUS 2003.



disposal, not accessible to anyone else, from the morning of Christmas Eve through 7 January, except that unmarried girls were invited to an abundant dinner on Christmas Eve. During the other days the boys were dancing and having a gay time on their own when they weren't going shouting, dancing, and playing from house to house conducted by the leader, called either *mosul de turca* or *Vataf cel mare*—the great Vataf, if the leader was older than twenty-one—or *Vataf cel mic*—little Vataf, if he was younger than twenty-one. Behind the leader, who carried the so-called *turca* mask over his head, we find the *rîndas*, the knight, carrying a black-painted star on his forehead, followed by the *bloj*, the fool or jester of the group.

If the *colinde* festival was a relatively well-organized and quiet event, the carnival mummerly linked to the festival was more violent, more ironic, more “absurd,” and more grotesque. The village streets and the narrow alleys of the small country towns were crowded with a large number of masked people dressed up as old women and men, red deer and other animals, princes and their servants, Gypsies, and ladies in waiting, all of whom walked from house to house, from door to door, shouting and roaring as much as they could. The “old men” were young boys dressed in used fur coats, trousers, and caps made of sheepskin, the same material of which the face mask was done, while the long nose was made of red goatskin and the mouth was marked with beans and bordered by beard and moustaches. The old man was usually accompanied by a devil in skin-tight costume with horns and a hairy mask covering his face and carrying a long pitchfork in his hands. The third obligatory figure was the old lady, a boy dressed in women's clothes with a fez of Turkish model on his head and a spinning wheel in his belt, usually followed by both “the Jew” and “the Jewess,” “the doctor,” and “Father Bercu,” the latter of whom wore a big hunch made of rags under a many-colored peasant shirt; on his head he wore a hat to which foxtails were attached, while his face was covered with an ugly mask made of black goatskin with long temple locks and a long beard made of horsehair. In his hand he held a “rosary” and a packet of matches, all the while joking and talking at great length about his latest business affairs in a totally incomprehensible jargon, a senseless gibberish. These main characters were joined by a large number of “Moors” and other “southerners,” a kind of harlequins, all dressed in black. Everybody was accompanied by grotesque gestures and changes in facial expression, lashes of whips, the sound of cowbells, and deafening uproar.

Another form of popular drama was the performances at which the masked “actors” were dressed in showy, colorful dresses, one more exotic than the other, performances whose origin went back to the medieval mystery plays and which were called *Vicleimul* after the Romanian name of Bethlehem, or sometimes “Magi” plays or Herod plays. In near connection with these we find the popular puppet shows, influenced by the Turkish Karagöz plays with silhouette figures, mostly performed in the cities, in Bucharest for instance in the Sfântul Gheorghe park at different carnivals and festivals. One of the main characters besides Herod and the Magi was the “dealer in yogurt,” a gaudy, bold guy who spread around himself an almost incomprehensible or at least extremely abstruse jargon containing many funny, fancy, or distorted words underlining the comic point of view. Another of the characters was the cunning Pasmaky, as well as a Russian Cossack and the soldier Asan together with the whimsical Sergeant Major Ghinda, a laughable comic figure who did nothing but loudly boast of all his brave deeds, and “Aunt Mitza,” who, making grotesque faces, invited those who happened to pass by for a glass of beer or candies.

One other expression of popular culture that the Romanian dadaists must have known, although they may never have had the opportunity to participate in it themselves, was the so-called *ciurica* festival celebrated in June in the Danube region, reserved for women only, who carried out one burlesque prank after another all day long, always directed toward the men and their puffed-up claims on power and influence. There was also the carnival-like festival that was celebrated the night before *lunea burdufului*, the “Monday with goat’s-milk cheese,” the first day of the big Lent before Easter, when the youths of the village ran around the village dressed in women’s clothes with a big cowbell around their neck and their faces covered with a mask shaped like a red deer with big antlers, beating all those passing by, even children, with sacks filled with ashes. Later in the evening the boys and the newly married men, still dressed in women’s clothes but now with a big calabash over their heads, gathered together for the so-called cuckoo procession, in which they carried a long stick at the point of which a ragged shoe dangled by the help of which they violently beat everybody in their way.

When Hugo Ball describes Marcel Janco’s painted and glued masks and puppets as nonhuman, with wide-open mouths and broad noses in the wrong place, and when



**FIGURE 10.3**

Masks in Nereju in 1927.

Photo: Iosif Berman. Muzeul

Țăranului Român, Bucharest.

at the same time he says that the performer's arms, menacingly raised, were elongated by special tubes and that the masks and the costumes demanded a quite definite, passionate gesture, bordering on madness, while the dadaists suddenly found themselves walking around with the most bizarre movements, festooned and draped with impossible objects, each of them trying to outdo the others in inventiveness,<sup>17</sup> he seems to be indirectly describing something he himself had never seen before but which the maker of the grotesque masks and puppets must have known very well from his own childhood. If Ball says that the masks recall the Japanese or ancient Greek theater, Janco himself must have associated them with nothing else than the Romanian *turca* mask and the leader of the *colinde* festival, often representing an old man leaning on a thick knotted stick and dressed in hand-woven carpets and colored scarves or wrapped in a big sheepskin coat. At the end of his mask, suggesting a fallow deer with big antlers between which colored strips, ivy, mistletoe, and small ringing bells are hanging, there is a stick, more than one meter long. At the lower jaw, which suggests a long wooden tongue, strings are attached to make it possible to move the jaw, thus producing a high clattering sound while the player dances a grotesque, almost obscene dance accompanied by indescribably noisy fragments of songs and absurd lines and words. The formal resemblances between the *turca* masks and the settings of the *colinde* festival and Janco's masks and his stage settings are too striking to be insignificant, in light of Janco's supposed internalization and diving into the depths of cultures and psyche. And doesn't the gigantic straw puppet "Der Strohmann" Firdusi in Kokoschka's *Sphinx und Strohmann* recall its origin in the old peasant culture in the same way as the setting of Hugo Ball's *Krippenspiel* associates with the *Vicleimul* plays in the far Romanian villages?

Although Tristan Tzara most probably coined the term Dada, Marietta di Monaco recalled an episode that seems to illustrate how the process of internalization may have happened in the Romanian dadaists: an evening when Richard Huelsenbeck thought that the blond girl from Geneva, whom the dadaists had engaged instead of a "genuine Frenchwoman," was no longer suitable for the company, an opinion against which Hugo Ball protested loudly (in German): "We need her for our coloring!—She is our hobbyhorse!" Whereupon Marietta di Monaco, according to herself, exclaimed "Our Dada," rapidly translating the word for hobbyhorse into

French. Independently of the contextually natural associations close at hand with the soap company Bergmann's logotype, the Romanians—in the company of the Alsatians—were the only ones who immediately understood the suggested word. If Marietta di Monaco had intuitively associated the soap company's crossed cockhorses, Tristan Tzara was, according to her, the first one to react, exclaiming: "Now we have a name!—We have Dada!—Here we create Dada!"<sup>18</sup>

It is not impossible but rather characteristic of the psychic "diving" that Tzara intuitively thought of Saint Dada, who was—as mentioned before—celebrated on Tzara's own birthday, since he apparently combined the saint and the cockhorses of the soap company with another sort of cockhorses that the Romanians must have known and that were topical in their own childhood in the same cultural milieu in which the saint was celebrated, namely the cockhorses that were used in connection with the various popular festivals in the Romanian villages and which also have been linked to the carved stick which the leader of the *colinde* festival carried at the head of the roaring procession. The horse had a significant position in the old peasant culture as the bearer of specific symbolic meanings and as a sign of ancient magical forces, and up to the end of the nineteenth century the horse had a special holiday in Romania, the "day of the horse." At the many festivals out in the villages, usually at least one of the participants represented a horseman riding on a long stick at the end of which a horse's head was attached with a bridle decorated with golden buttons. The "horseman" was dressed in a women's coat or in a white vest, at the same time as he had a fez-like cap on his head with a bundle of twigs at the forehead, like a soldier. The carved stick of the leader is also interesting in this context, because it has been compared not only to the classical thyrsos stick linked to ancient fertility rites but also to the stick used in big peasant weddings, which symbolized the magical powers of the horse and was even itself defined as a horse: the bravest of the boys, particularly the groomsman, danced the so-called horse dance, in which a long stick played a significant role. In Moldavia so-called horse duels took place between the "armies" of the bride and the bridegroom, where the winner received the "banner" from the bride, a stick with a bunting whose magical function was identical with that of the "horse" in the horse dance.

When speaking of his Dada poetry, Tzara emphasized the continuity in his chronology, even though he removed his earliest poems published in *Simbolul* when Sașa Pană collected his *Primele poeme*. The rationale that these poems would be “uninteresting” sounds peculiar and not particularly plausible from a poet almost never revealing his motivations, and thus implies that he here explicitly wished to mark a break, even though he eloquently tells of his first experiences as a poet in his autobiographical remarks in 1923 without rejecting the first poems.<sup>19</sup> Of course, in this context it is impossible to assert something definitely, but it is not impossible that Tzara’s decision to exclude his very first poems from a collection that he himself suggested should be entitled exactly “the first poems” was caused by his testified will or rather urge to appear as an independent, authentic, and original poet as much as possible, simply because the first poems reveal a rather dependent poet, the imitator Samuel Rosenstock instead of the dadaist and modernist Tristan Tzara at the center of European avant-garde movements. It is certainly true that Mircea Scarlat is somewhat blunt in explaining Rosenstock as an imitator of Minulescu without literary images or metaphors of his own and relating the imitation to the young author’s dependence on Romanian symbolism, without taking into consideration other possible literary connections.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Rosenstock’s early poems are a kind of bridge, their melancholic pitch and nightfall-lyrical timbre associating with the melodious and emotionally tinged Romanian popular poetry at the same time as important parts of this poetry also resemble the later dadaist “lamentations.”

According to the vast majority of Romanian-related scholars, including the Swedish translator Jon Milos,<sup>21</sup> one cannot fully understand Romanian poetry without knowing and understanding the popular poetry that is the basis of almost all Romanian culture, including its art and literature. Especially notable are the epic folk ballads and the so-called *doina* poems, with the ballad telling of the little lamb Miorita and the epic ballad “Mesterul Manole” about the carpenter Manole being the most famous.<sup>22</sup> The melancholic *doina* songs, according to the Romanian literary scholar Ion Dodu Bălan a “true expression of the Romanian soul” and at the same time one of the oldest forms of popular poetry in Romania,<sup>23</sup> are one of the most widespread genres of oral poetry. The songs are performed in an ancient, quietly humming style starting with an “oh” prolonged until the voice dies out while each verse starts with the words *frunza verde*, “green leaf,” according to Milos the symbol

of hope.<sup>24</sup> All the songs are rhymed and follow a rigorous prosody, singing of love or a bird, especially the cuckoo, or the spring. The songs are always anonymous and function often as a kind of inner monologue in which the “poet” talks to himself about life, love, happiness, longing, pain, sorrow, and troubles, when he doesn’t speak directly to the animals and the plants, the clouds, the mountains, the sun, the moon, and the stars. Like many other popular poetic discourses, the doina songs too are permeated with recurrent identical phrases, attributes, and epithets, functioning as aids for the memory, phrases that in other contexts might be rejected as pure kitsch, for instance when the mouth of the beloved smells like wine and her arms like rosemary while her teeth are like pearls and her eyes like a sparkling cut-glass vase. According to Lucian Blaga, the doina songs reveal what he calls the “Miorita space” of the unconsciousness, a special kind of a matrix space, a very special spatial horizon: the song expresses the melancholy, not too heavy and not too light, of a soul that goes up and down on an indefinitely rolling land, farther and farther away, again and again, or of a soul undertaking its journey through the lands, climbing and descending, in a reiterated, monotonous, endless rhythm.<sup>25</sup>

According to Jon Milos, the concept of *dorul* as well has an important position in this poetry, constituting together with the songs themselves the typical Romanian way of feeling, thinking, and being in the world. *Dorul* is, according to Milos’s ethno-romantic way of expressing it, a “metaphysical longing for eternity, the undefined home of the soul, a revelation from the inner reaches of the soul to make prevail its beauty and its power to charm,” manifested in love, sometimes as a cry of pain, sometimes as a laugh of joy.<sup>26</sup> This too recalls Samuel Rosenstock’s early poems too much to be only a coincidence without significance for his Dada poems as well.

In regard to Tristan Tzara’s dadaist dramas, which obviously and almost overexplicitly reject the bourgeois theater tradition in favor of stylizing the true complication of life, its sometimes grotesque and paradoxical conditions full of contradictions, the German scholar Inge Kümmerle points at popular farce as one of the most important historical models.<sup>27</sup> According to Kümmerle, Tzara seems to refer to theatrical situations close to dances, sorceries, and choir singing in “primitive” cultures and preclassical Greek antiquity, also recalling Nietzsche’s description of the Greek Dionysian cult. But even though Tzara, like the other dadaists, of course knew both

the Dionysian cult and the role of the choir in the classical drama, other influences and connections might also have been as relevant, if not even more so.

The dadaists' interest in "primitive" cultural modes of expression doesn't, of course, have to be linked purely to explicitly Romanian popular culture, but even though the German and the French cabaret traditions were among the constituting elements at the Meierei, it is hardly a coincidence that the dadaist performances and the pranks at Cabaret Voltaire, as well as a great deal of Dada poetry, can so easily be associated with the mainly oral peasant culture. Thus, for instance, the Dada soirée of 30 March 1916 appears to be a parody of the *colinde* festival, while, for instance, the "bishop episode" on 14 July associates with the strongly shamanistic and ecstatic *bocete* songs, ancient lamentations performed by professional mourners at burials, accompanied by strongly formalized ceremonies in connection with which the participants are dressed in various stylized masks.<sup>28</sup> A few months before Hugo Ball was carried off the stage like a magical bishop, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and Richard Huelsenbeck climbed up on the little platform, bowed, according to Huelsenbeck like a babbling company busy paying homage to the lakes and the forests, picked up their sheets of music, and threw everything up in the air while Huelsenbeck recited: "Aholi, ahoi! Des Admirals qwirktes Beinkleid schnell zefällt." At the same time Tzara cried as loud as he could: "Boumboum boum il dehabilla sa chair quand les grenouilles humides commencèrent à bruler . . .". During the rhythmic breaks after every line Huelsenbeck beat on a big bass drum singing plaintively "hi-hiyaboumm," while Tzara constantly repeated "rougebleau, rougebleau" to the sound of a castanet and Janco played on a whistle. Sometimes all three cried "ooooo" or "prrrza chrraz" or "zimzim uralla zimzim uralla zimzim zanzibar zimzallazam."<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt that oral speech was one of Dada's most important instruments and modes of expression. Writing draws its origin from oral speech, and it is exactly this origin that the dadaists were searching for. Tristan Tzara, for instance, links oral speech directly to "primitive" art and poetry when he explains in the journal *Sic* in 1917 that "the thought is made in the mouth,"<sup>30</sup> commenting on the mystical, irrational forces of "primitive"—popular—poetry and remarking that "the mouth has a peculiar force, an invisible substance, goodness, fear, creation, fire."<sup>31</sup> In the same year he declares in the anthology *Dada 2* that the dadaists "wish to continue the tradition from the negro art, Egyptian and Byzantine art and to destroy the atavistic



sensibility.” One year later he says in his Dada manifesto that one has to “lick the penumbra and float in the big mouth filled with honey and excrement.”<sup>32</sup> Hans Arp in turn explains that his own autonomous poems are “babbling, cursing, sighing, stuttering, yodeling exactly as they wish,”<sup>33</sup> while Hugo Ball speaks of the “power of the living word” and says that reciting aloud has become the touchstone of the quality of the poem and that he has learned from the stage to what extent today’s literature is worked out as a problem at the desk and is made for the spectacles of the collector instead of for the ears of living human beings. A few weeks later he declares that the simultaneous poem has to do with the value of the voice: the human organ represents the soul, the individuality “in its wanderings with its demonic companions.”<sup>34</sup> In June 1916 Ball speaks of the “plasticity of the word” and says, referring to Marinetti’s *parole in libertà*, that the dadaists go a step further than the futurists:

*We tried to give the isolated vocables the fullness of an oath, the glow of a star. And curiously enough, the magically inspired vocables conceived and gave birth to a new sentence that was not limited and confined by any conventional meaning. Touching lightly on a hundred ideas at the same time without naming them, this sentence made it possible to hear the innately playful, but hidden, irrational character of the listener; it wakened and strengthened the lowest strata of memory. Our experiments touched on areas of philosophy and of life that our environment—so rational and so precocious—scarcely let us dream of.*<sup>35</sup>

The sounds and signs that the dadaists were looking for can scarcely be interpreted as anything but the signs of oral speech, something experienced in and with the whole body, with all the senses, something that undoubtedly works outside modern rationality. And this eagerly awaited “paradisiac” state of being can only be interpreted as something that permeates every primarily oral culture, the old peasant cultures as well, which relates to the spoken word in a way too similar to Dada’s to be only a coincidence. Without a discourse fixed within writing, the word of oral cultures has no visible presence but is mainly experienced as a concrete, palpable sound quality in the speech act itself. The words are experienced as actual occurrences and as particular, concrete events. Language as such is experienced as a series of actions and events in additive formations, thought itself is shaped according to

strongly rhythmical and repeating formulas and models, in constant repetitions and linguistic antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in formula-like expressions and stereotyped phrases, in standardized themes, in proverbs, clichés, epithets, and other elements ready to mount on the thought, each of these experienced instantaneously as if it was a matter of a constant feedback, a constant repetition of phrases—just like a Dada poem or a Dada performance.

Remarkable also is the fact that the dadaists acted almost in the same manner as the contemporary Czech composer Leoš Janáček did in, for instance, his opera *Výlety paně Broučkovy* (1917) and in his orchestral rhapsody *Taras bulba* (1918), inspired by the melody of speech among the peasants in the region of Hukvaldy, Janáček's birthplace, where the peasants cut off the word endings as if by a knife. The rhythm of speech was broken, and this was varied in the folksongs of the region by the repetition of the broken parts of speech. Thus, Janáček's music was characterized by broken rhythms, kaleidoscopic short themes, frequent, rapid, and barely changing repetitions of particular words, sentences, and musical phrases.

If the dadaists indirectly referred to “primitive” oral cultures, it is hardly a coincidence that dadaist theatricality also suggests the medieval carnival as this is described by Mikhail Bakhtin in his famous survey of Rabelais and the history of laughter in medieval popular culture,<sup>36</sup> since the carnival was originally connected with a mainly oral cultural context. According to Bakhtin, the carnival's staging of reality expresses the united but at the same time complex experience of the world of “simple people,” hostile toward everything fixed and completed, in terms of a language which—like the dadaist nonsense verse—is full of playful and constantly changing modes of expression permeated by the consciousness of the happy relativity of every prevailing truth and power. The staging and its language are characterized, like any dadaist soirée, by the paradoxical logic of reversal, by parodies and travesties, profanations, derogations, and dethronings. The carnival is also the festival that starts with a hint that everybody is allowed to act as crazily as he wishes, since everything is permitted and nothing forbidden in this dismantling of the hierarchical social order through the absolute freedom and impudence of laughter. It is like Tristan Tzara in his manifesto of Mr. Aa the antiphilosopher:

Take a good look at me!  
I am an idiot, I am a clown, I am a faker.  
Take a good look at me!  
I am ugly, my face has no expression, I am little.  
I am like all of you!<sup>37</sup>

As at Cabaret Voltaire, numerous genres both big and small are gathered together on the merrymaking square, all of them permeated by the same unofficial recognition of the world, where the holy and the profane get the same status and are dragged into the same whirlpool of words and gestures, where the king becomes the jester and the jester king, the “king” who is offended and beaten at the end of his reign just as the stuffed carnival figure of the passing winter or the old year is ridiculed and torn into pieces.

Perhaps the most important of all medieval carnivals, the feast of fools, the *festa stultorum* or *fête des fous*, was celebrated with disguises, masks, and obscene dances mainly on the same days as the *colinde* festival was celebrated in the Romanian villages several hundred years later, on Saint Stephen’s Day, New Year’s Day, Holy Innocents’ Day, Epiphany, and Midsummer Day, when the popular culture of laughter lived free and unconstrained. On the whole the place of the medieval festival in the calendar year was of the greatest importance in regard to its unofficial, comic, and popular aspect, thus connected to the changes of time and seasons. Here the ancient connections with the seasons, the phases of the sun and the moon, birth, death, and the flowering of the vegetation, the cyclic changes of agriculture, were renewed. If for instance we apply Bakhtin’s interpretation of the celebration of Saint Lazarus’ day, when, for instance in Marseilles, all the horses, mules, donkeys, bulls, and cows were dragged through the streets while the people, dressed up in fancy costumes and masks, were dancing the “big dance” in the streets exactly as the villagers in the Romanian villages were celebrating the popular festival the night before Palm Sunday, when specially elected groups, *copii colindetorii*, in Romania were singing the so-called Lazarus’ song, this Romanian festival may also be interpreted as a rite of fertility, revised after centuries of hibernation, since Lazarus, raised from the dead, was linked to the theme of rebirth.

As if referring to any Dada soir ee, Bakhtin points also to the prologue of Rabelais's third book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the latter of which was also the name of one of the cabarets at which Emmy Hennings had performed in Zurich before she and Hugo Ball founded Cabaret Voltaire. Here the links of the medieval feast of fools and the festival in general to the "grotesque body" are revealed as the metaphor of the mystery of fertility and rebirth when Rabelais speaks to the listeners in the square, letting the story proceed as the discourse of the marketplace itself, filled with images of the banquet, comic elements, puns, reservations, and linguistic travesties recalling the market jester's introductory words before the performance starts. Both the end of the prologue and its introduction have a special interest in regard to both the dadaist soir ees and how certain important elements of the carnival survived in Romanian peasant culture: the prologue ends with an unprecedented sequence of curses and invectives by the help of which the author puts to flight all those who don't understand how to drink the intoxicating wine, all those parasites and pedants, troublemakers and tormentors, cheaters and hypocrites, all those representatives of official truth and ideology, all those enemies of free and happy relativity. In the introduction, this relativity is represented by none else than Diogenes with his barrel, transformed into a cask of wine in which people urinate. The wine is linked to relieving oneself, the intoxication to the speaking body in the rebellion of mad laughter, weaving together the general theme in Rabelais around the grotesque body, the body transcending itself, the body going outside its own boundaries in terms of its own food, excrement, and fluids. Or as Tristan Tzara says, continuing his invocation of himself as an idiot and a clown, the merrymaking faker:

*But ask yourselves, before looking at me, if the iris by which you send out arrows of liquid sentiments, is not fly shit, if the eyes of your belly are not sections of tumors that will some day peer from some part of your body in the form of a gonorrhoeal discharge.*

*You will see your navel—why do you hide from it the absurd spectacle that we present? And farther down, sex organs of women, with teeth, all-swallowing—the poetry of eternity, love, pure love of course—rare steaks and oil painting. All those who look and understand, easily fit in between poetry and love, between the beefsteak and the painting. They will be digested. They will be digested.*

*I was recently accused of stealing some furs. Probably because I was still thought to be among the poets. Among those poets who satisfy their legitimate need for cold onanism with warm furs: H o h o, I know other pleasures, equally platonic. Call your family on the telephone and piss in the hole reserved for musical gastronomic and sacred stupidities.<sup>38</sup>*

Diogenes is the first ancestor of the cynical, indecent type, “pissing against the idealistic wind,” as the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk puts it,<sup>39</sup> the solitary queer customer masturbating in public between the columns in Plato’s academy. He enters the marketplace as Tzara enters the stage of Cabaret Voltaire in the company of the other dadaists, he is the cabaret artist, the jester, and the clown living what he says and saying what he lives in making himself his own instrument; he is impudent, offensive, filthy, dirty, swinish, and rude, exactly like the dadaists. Diogenes is also the “dog philosopher,” and it is probably only a coincidence but at the same time an interesting fact that Tristan Tzara describes Dada as a dog in his manifesto of feeble and bitter love.<sup>40</sup> Diogenes opens the non-Platonic dialogue and shows that the Apollo of reason has another face, the one that belongs to the satyr, the rascal, and the comedian, having a distant relative in the *bloj*, the “idiot,” and the jester of the *colinde* festival, the one who awakens indescribable merriness among the villagers through his provocations, characterized by both terribly insulting words and equally strong words of praise; for a moment the villagers are set free of the constraints and hardships of life, like the audience at the Meierei.



11

**IN Yiddishland**

Dada is a phenomenon that resists definition.<sup>1</sup> According to most of the handbooks, Dada is a literary and artistic ism among other isms somewhere between cubism, futurism, and surrealism. The dadaists themselves are much more vague, both more nuanced and at the same time less sophisticated in their descriptions, of which there are at least as many as the dadaists themselves. Hugo Ball, for instance, defines Dada in his diary in 1927 as a “farce of nothingness”

*in which all higher questions are involved; a gladiator's gesture, a play with shabby leftovers, the death warrant of posturing morality and abundance. The dadaist loves the extraordinary and the absurd. He knows that life asserts itself in contradiction, and that his age aims at the destruction of generosity as no other age has ever done before. He therefore welcomes any kind of mask. Any game of hide-and-seek, with its inherent power to deceive.*<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the dadaists welcomed any kind of mask and any game of hide-and-seek, especially when it came to explaining what Dada really was. Thus, Tristan Tzara explains in his Dada manifesto of 1918 that he is against all kinds of principles, that he won't deliver any explanations since he detests greasy objectivity and ordinary common sense and since there simply is no final Truth and logic is always wrong: Dada means nothing, Dada has no theory.<sup>3</sup> Two years later he says in the manifesto of feeble and bitter love that the great mystery is a secret, known only to a few persons who will never say what Dada is. According to Tzara, there is but one justification for chatter: rejuvenation and the maintenance of biblical traditions. And this chatter is encouraged by the postal administration, the tobacco monopoly, the railroad companies, the hospitals, the undertaking establishments, the textile factories, and family culture. Chatter is encouraged by the pope's pence: every drop of saliva that escapes from conversation is converted into gold. Today it is only chatter that counts, and the form in which it most frequently turns up is Dada.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Huelsenbeck too is eager to underline the nondogmatic character of Dada and defines it as the philosophy of utmost affirmation and paradoxes. In his introduction to the *Dada Almanach* in 1920 he describes Dada as the great parallel to the contemporary relativistic philosophies. Dada is not an axiom but a state of mind

independent of all schools and theories, one that addresses individuality itself without doing violence to it:

*One cannot reduce Dada to principles. The question: “What is Dada?” is undadaist and schoolboyish just as the question would be if asked of a work of art or a phenomenon of life. One cannot understand Dada; one must experience it. Dada is immediate and obvious. If you’re alive, you are a Dadaist. Dada is the neutral point between content and form, male and female, matter and spirit, since it is the apex of that magical triangle that rises from the linear polarity of human affairs and concepts. Dada is the American aspect of Buddhism; it blusters because it knows how to be quiet; it agitates because it is a peace. Thus Dada is neither politics nor art movement; it votes neither for humanity nor for barbarity—it “has war and peace under its toga, but decides in favor of the cherry brandy flip.”<sup>5</sup>*

Since Dada is a movement in peace, an experience, and a naivete trying to prevail over common sense—calling a plum a plum and a chair a chair—since Dada is independent of everything and is able to connect itself with everything, Dada turns against every kind of ideology, every kind of combative stance, against every inhibition or barrier. Dada is elasticity itself; it cannot grasp people’s attachment to anything, be it money or an idea. Concepts can be handled like a collection of dominoes. “Just what is Dada for?” Huelsenbeck asks, and answers:

*Anyone who asks that is further removed from Dadaism than an animal from epistemological principles. Dada has long recognized peace and order as a need characteristic of people who want their experience substantiated by ethics. Dada cannot be justified by any system that approaches people with “Thou shalt.” Dada rests within itself and acts of its own accord, just as the sun acts when it rises in the sky or when a tree grows. The tree grows without wanting to grow. Dada does not burden its actions with “goal”-oriented motives. Dada does not foster abstractions in words, formulae and systems intended to be applied to human society. It needs no proof and no justification, neither through formulae*



*nor through systems. Dada is pure creative process. Dada has given birth to the torpor and tempo of these times from its own head.*<sup>6</sup>

According to Huelsenbeck, the dadaist is free to adopt any mask, he can represent any “art movement” since he belongs to no movement; Dada advocates no theory, Dada is.

Georges Hugnet too was able to define Dada as a state of mind as late as 1934, before the handbooks “won the battle” with their narrow and at the same time comfortable definitions. According to Hugnet, Dada is a statement, both incurable and ridiculous:

*Dada is ageless. If it has a face, it secretly loses it and recovers it unmetamorphosed. It has no poor relations; it is all alone; it makes no distinction between what is and what isn't. It sides with what it combats. It affirms what it negates; it negates itself and replenishes its strength from its negated negation. It attacks you head-on and insidiously. It doesn't speak. It is always present—behind every word. It undermines established institutions. Suddenly Dada speaks abundantly and there is an enduring silence, so enduring that suddenly and progressively sounds cease to be words, and in the morning there is new thought without confusion or expectation.*<sup>7</sup>

Dada is no ism, no literary or artistic style or current. Dada is something else entirely, and didn't Hans Arp already explain that Dada existed before Dada—“Bevor Dada da war, war Dada da”?<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Dada is perhaps only a simple word, but perhaps still not any word but a very special one, if we are to believe Michel Sanouillet when he tries to define the word or rather the phenomenon in his essay “Dada: A Definition” in 1979.<sup>9</sup> According to him, most of those who have tried to define Dada have mainly been interested in the history of the phenomenon, as well as in the dadaists' own efforts, and have lost sight of an essential factor, namely the fact that Dada is mainly a word, a totally new word, in itself a senseless and magical word meaning more to dadaism than any other individual word to any other literary or artistic current. Independently of whether the word was found by chance or in a dictionary, the dadaists experienced it as a linguistic toy, Sanouillet says, and refers to Jacques Rivière's

conviction that the dadaists considered words to be merely coincidences: they let them happen—language was no tool any more, it was a being. In other words, it is obvious that the dadaists and their adherents experienced “Dada” as a being with a special status rather than a concept or a term in the conventional sense of the word. When the dadaists declared that Dada has no meaning, like nature, according to Sanouillet this illustrates how they considered Dada a biological unity, an organism similar to plants or animals: a fruit, a tomato, a virgin microbe, a chameleon. In other words, Dada is both everything and nothing. Dada, both noun and adjective, both subject and object, covers practically the entire grammatical spectrum. Dada is everything that exists and cannot exist outside existence itself. According to Sanouillet, Dada cannot therefore be used as a normal semantic unit, and there is only one word in our language enjoying as many privileges: the word God. Dada contains and takes upon itself the manifestations of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, where the Son manifests the actual literary and artistic modes of expression.

As already suggested, it is obvious that Dada actually has a link to God, i.e., through Saint Dada, at least. According to Richard Sheppard,<sup>10</sup> who gives numerous illustrative examples, there is also no doubt about dadaism being related to both Oriental and Christian mysticism. Among the dadaists at the Meierei, not only Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings were interested in religious mysticism. Richard Huelsenbeck, for instance, referred to the Gospel of Matthew, while Hans Arp made a series of illustrations to the *Bhagavadgita* at the same time as he was presented as a great expert on Jakob Boehme and the *Tao te ching*, the latter of which defines the concept of tao in terms strikingly similar to the attributes and adjectives by the help of which the dadaists defined Dada. Although Sheppard points in detail and convincingly at a connection never before noticed, he also underlines the differences between the dadaists and both the Christian mystics and the Taoists. For instance, the dadaists never longed for an ecstatic absorption by nature, even though they tried to establish a dynamic balance in the chaotic and absurdly flowing reality, manifested in the clash between opposites. The expressionist cult of ecstasy had taught them that such an absorption could destroy this balance and lead to a totalitarian state of being. The dadaists didn't recognize the personal, loving God of Christian mysticism either, but rather confessed the impersonal and capricious forces of nature. Where the Christian

mystics pay a great deal of their attention to spiritual introspection, the dadaists praise an extrovert, almost carnal excess. And where the Christian mystics emphasize the importance of self-discipline, prayer, and religious exercises to reach the divine light, the dadaists emphasize the spontaneous present beyond good and evil. Where the Christian mystics, after all, recognize a distinction between God and His creation, between soul and matter, Dada is monistic and emphasizes the unity of living forces, of material world and human psyche, both unconditionally dependent on the creation.

Dada is neither personal nor impersonal, has neither qualities nor attributes, is everything and nothing at the same time—yet the connection with the highest divine being of both Christian and Oriental mysticism appears problematic and not very adequate. Dada, of course, is not this being, and the contrast to this being seems too fundamental to readily justify such a connection, as Sheppard shows, even though Hugo Ball, after leaving dadaism, tried everything possible to explain and comment on Dada from the point of view of mainly Catholic mysticism. But—and this is important—there is another God or divine being which at least the Romanians at the Meierei must have recognized and perhaps even confessed and to which Saint Dada too must have paid his deepest respect: namely, Jahweh.

How amazing is the result when we play the dadaist hide-and-seek game the wrong way round, so to speak, and look at the “absurd” descriptions of God and the concept of Ein Sof in *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the *Book of Radiance*, the canonical text of the cabala ascribed to rabbi Moses de León of the thirteenth century, who composed several ancient books and texts into a coherent commentary on the Torah in the form of a mystical novel; indeed, parts of the *Zohar* may have been composed through automatic writing, a technique not unfamiliar to the dadaists, in which the mystic would meditate on a divine name, enter a trance, and begin to “write whatever came to his hand.” Ultimately Ein Sof, representing the radical transcendence of God in contrast to the personal God of the Sefirot, can be described only in negative terms, by means of negations, as “Nothingness,” as something that has neither qualities nor attributes, something that is both everything and nothing at the same time: God as infinity, whereas the Sefirot manifest His presence in the creation of the universe. According to the *Zohar*,<sup>11</sup> anything visible, and anything that can be grasped by thought, is bounded, at the same time as anything bounded is finite but not undifferentiated.

Conversely, the boundless is called Ein Sof, Infinite, absolute undifferentiation in perfect, changeless oneness. Since it is boundless, there is nothing outside of it. Since it transcends and conceals itself, it is the essence of everything hidden and revealed, the root of both faith and rebellion:

*Ein Sof cannot be conceived, certainly not expressed, though it is intimated in everything, for there is nothing outside of it. No letter, no name, no writing, no thing can confine it. The witness testifying in writing that there is nothing outside of it is: "I am that I am." Ein Sof has no will, no intention, no desire, no thought, no speech, no action—yet there is nothing outside of it. . . . First, you should know that the Creator, Ein Sof, is the cause of causes, one without a second, one that cannot be counted. Change and mutability, form and multiplicity, do not apply to it. . . . Ein Sof is present in all things in actuality, while all things are present in it potentially. It is the beginning and cause of everything.<sup>12</sup>*

The hidden God expresses Himself and may be described only through the so-called ten Sefirot, through which Ein Sof's actions are performed:

*Emanating from Ein Sof are the ten Sefirot. They constitute the process by which all things come into being and pass away. They energize every existent thing that can be quantified. . . . They serve as vessels for the actions deriving from Ein Sof in the world of separation and below. In fact, its existence and essence spread through them.<sup>13</sup>*

Now, if we exercise a play of thought similar to Michel Sanouillet's in regard to the Father Dada, the Son Dada, and the Holy Spirit Dada, we may, in other words, suggest that Dada takes upon itself not three appearances but two: Dada as a word and a concept corresponds to the Ein Sof of the *Zohar*, while the movement itself, its actors and their absurd, bizarre art and actions in time and space, corresponds to the Sefirot, the flowing energy emanating from Dada. Indeed, if God is described in the *Zohar* as 'Ayin, nothing or nothingness, can't we literally translate Tristan Tzara's saying in his Dada manifesto of 1918 that "Dada means nothing" into "Dada is nothing"?

Of course, both Sanouillet's play of thought and the revised version would be merely word-twisting metaphors were it not for the fact, totally ignored in both Western and Romanian research, that all of the Romanians in Zurich in 1916, both Tristan Tzara and the three Janco brothers as well as Arthur Segal, grew up in Jewish families, within which Jewish culture must have played a more or less important role, from the Orthodoxy of the Sigalu family to the supposed but not fully confirmed assimilation of the Rosenstock family, in a country that had a Jewish population of about 270,000 persons out of a total population of almost six million at the turn of the century. This Jewish minority had increased to nearly 430,000 persons by the 1910s and to almost half a million ten years later. In the interwar period the number increased to approximately 800,000 persons, which was more than 7 percent of the whole population.<sup>14</sup> According to contemporary reports based on the census of the population in 1899,<sup>15</sup> the Jewish population of Wallachia and Moldavia included 269,015 persons, divided by legislation into two categories, with some 250,000 persons classified as Jews living in the country for generations and therefore not defined as belonging to a "foreign state," while the other 20,000 were classified as persons enjoying protection from other states.

The fact that the Jewish population increased so strikingly with the birth of Greater Romania in 1918 must have been a kind of irony of fate in the eyes of the political and cultural establishment, in many respects strongly anti-Semitic, since the Jewish minority had decreased by more than 40,000 persons between 1899 and 1904 and by 70,000 persons between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the war in 1914 due to massive emigration, which had caused international indignation. This emigration, on foot, was among the most dramatic in the entire Eastern Europe around the turn of the century, when enormous masses of poor Jewish families were forced to leave their homes in search of bread and jobs, starving families dressed in rags which the international Jewish alliance did everything possible to ameliorate. Not until unmanageably large groups had gathered at the railway stations and in the harbors of the surrounding countries, and not until Austro-Hungary had informed the Romanian authorities of its plans to send all Jews without tickets to a third country, did the Romanian government react by refusing to issue passports to Jews other than those intending to travel to the United States, Canada, or Argentina or having enough money to reach at least Hamburg, Paris, or London.<sup>16</sup>

The emigration was a consequence of the economic destitution among the majority of the Jews in the Romanian provincial towns, which in turn was a direct or indirect consequence of Romanian ethno-nationalism, directed against the Jews for the most part but also against other ethnic minorities. In this respect Romania seems unique, even though, for instance, the Russian Narodnik movement affected the Jews more than any other non-Russian minority. According to Iván Berend,<sup>17</sup> the inflamed “Jewish question” in Central and Eastern Europe was caused generally by the opposition between the traditional establishment and the old peasant class on the one hand and the new groups appearing at the core of modernity, the modern middle class and the working class. The Jews’ “otherness” in the society, in many respects still feudal and now shaken to its very foundations, together with the fact that the Jews were more or less overrepresented in the new groups, gave good possibilities for misinterpreting the actual causes of the social frictions. In the same way the growing and sometimes cruelly destructive capitalism, threatening certain collective social values and experienced as “imported,” might draw attention to the Jews. In societies with large Jewish minorities these two phenomena were linked together. At the same time, the anticapitalist labor movement was experienced as foreign and imported, in the last resort as Jewish, whereupon the general discontent was directed toward both at the same time, resulting in the common notion of a global Jewish conspiracy, within which Jewish capitalism together with Jewish socialism were experienced as attacking the “sound and healthy” domestic nation and its “authentic” values.

As far as Romania is concerned, the causal connection looks somewhat different, since it is difficult to point to any destructive capitalism or socialism before the end of the nineteenth century or even before the first decades of the twentieth century. On the contrary, Romanian nation-building seems at the very beginning to have started from unusually strong mechanisms to exclude those “elements” that were experienced as foreign. It is true that the Romanian principalities signed the treaty of Istanbul in 1856, according to which all groups of the population were to enjoy the same civil rights independent of place of birth or religion, but already twelve years later this international convention was reduced to cover only the Christians in Moldavia and Wallachia. The constitution signed by Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen in July 1866 involved even more restrictions on the ethnic minorities as the seventh article stipulated that only Christian non-Romanians could gain

Romanian citizenship, an article leading to the classification of the Jews as “foreigners” or “strangers” for whom particular laws were instituted. On the same day as the article passed, the new synagogue was destroyed in Bucharest; a few months later the ministry of internal affairs issued a decree to all prefects in the country, according to which Jews were no longer allowed to live in the villages in the country, to run hotels, inns, or cabarets, or to rent apartments.

Mainly under pressure from France, England, and Germany at the 1878 Congress of Berlin, the Romanian government was forced to change article seven, so that religious membership or confession should no longer be a hindrance to gaining or exercising full civil or political rights, under the conditions that the person in question had lived in the country for more than ten years and that he or she by dealings and conduct had showed his or her capacity to be useful to the country, with some exceptions. But despite Romania’s solemn pledges before the international community, the new constitution seems to have been of little consequence, while the rest of the legislation, as well as public opinion, seem to have had the greater effect, since it is almost impossible to demonstrate any substantial improvements in the rights and conditions of the minorities in this period. According to Jericho Polonius in 1901,<sup>18</sup> only about 200 Jews enjoyed full civil rights at the turn of the century, which was also a condition for being elected a member of the chamber of commerce, for instance; at the same time it was stipulated that more than half of the shareholders of a limited company must be “standard” Romanians, as must at least two-thirds of the workers of an industrial company with more than twenty-five workers. More or less official reports claim also that perhaps fewer than a thousand Jews were naturalized between 1879 and 1914,<sup>19</sup> while other reports indicate that the number of Jews naturalized between 1879 and 1900 was only 85, of which 27 persons died during the period, while the number increased to about 500 up to 1919.<sup>20</sup>

Most Jews were also forced to pay a specific charge, the *taxa pentru străin*, to be able to send their children to the primary school, obligatory and free of charge for Romanians, in a country where more than 80 percent were still illiterate. Consequently the Jews started private schools of their own, at which instruction, however, was forbidden by law on Sundays while it was imposed on Saturdays, on the Sabbath. According to a law passed in April 1900, the instruction in Hebrew and religion was not allowed to take up more than two hours a day. The private schools were also to-

tally dependent on money from domestic and international Jewish aid organizations. Consequently there were only about 80 private “Israelite” schools in 1912. In general the language of instruction was Yiddish; the language of instruction for Romanian language and history was Romanian. There was also a special charge for “foreigners” in the upper secondary schools and the universities. According to statistics for the academic year 1900–1901, Jews made up 0.88 percent of all the pupils in the intermediate schools, while they comprised 25 percent of the total population of the cities, where the schools were located.

The anti-Semitic legislation permeated almost every sector of Romanian society. There was a kind of climax in 1902 when a new law of business and trade passed, according to which foreigners wishing to set up in business in Romania had to prove that similar rights were given to Romanians in their respective homelands, which, of course, was impossible for the Jews as they had no homeland in the legal sense of the word.

A great deal of the ideological legitimacy behind the anti-Semitic legislation was based on the notion of the Jews constituting a “nation within the nation”; they were considered foreigners of foreign race who had invaded Romania and who did everything possible to seize the country and its resources. One of the theoreticians behind the legislation was the philosopher and minister Vasile Conta, who thought that Romania would disappear as a nation if the Romanians did not fight back against the Jews, who had poisoned the sound Latin core. Another important and powerful figure was the poet Mihai Eminescu, who strongly opposed the Jews gaining full civil rights at the same time as he attacked the Greek, Bulgarian, Armenian, and other ethnic minorities who had, according to him, infiltrated the “national” bourgeoisie. Eminescu played a role of utmost importance within the conservative literary group Junimea, for the most part consisting of the country’s most representative intellectual elite by the end of the nineteenth century, eloquently expressing their nationalistic ideas in the journal *Convorbiri literare*. Like many of the members of Junimea, Eminescu thought that there was a fundamental discrepancy between the basis of the “true” Romanian society—the Romanian village and Romanian peasant culture—and the political ideologies of modern society, a notion which, for instance, Nicolae Iorga transmitted into the twentieth century, clearly directed against the “urban” and “cosmopolitan” Jews.



September 1886 is a kind of chronological milestone of early Romanian anti-Semitism, with the big Romanian-European anti-Semitic congress held in Bucharest, at which it was, for instance, declared that the Jews were unworthy of remaining in Europe as a nation; the congress demanded several legal acts against the Jews, to be carried out until there were more efficient means of driving them out of Europe. In 1895 a great number of the country's most important intellectuals and politicians were gathering together in an extremely influential anti-Semitic alliance, whose organization recalled a Masonic order and whose governing motto seemed to be "the end justifies the means." Among the members of the alliance, financed through governmental funds, we find the speaker of the parliament, the mayor of Bucharest, all the prefects, deputies, and senators, and many generals, professors, priests, and lawyers, all of them promising to make the situation impossible for the Jews and thereby encourage their emigration.<sup>21</sup>

Although neither the alliance nor other anti-Semitic organizations can be held directly responsible, it is significant that the first victims of the peasant rebellion in 1907 were Jews, mostly merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, and workers on the big estates; the "Jewish question" worked as a catalyst revealing remarkable social tensions in Romanian society.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the Romanian Jews lived in the Moldavian provincial towns.<sup>23</sup> Around 1850 almost half of the population of Iași, the Moldavian capital, was Jewish, and about one-third fifty years later, while the Jews in Bucharest, the capital of Wallachia, constituted a minority of 10 percent. At the turn of the century the Jewish minority was almost 11 percent of the total population of Moldavia, 2 percent of the population of Wallachia. While only about one million out of six million "standard" Romanians lived in cities and towns at the turn of the century, only about 50,000 of 270,000 Jews lived in the country, and then mainly as stewards and bookkeepers at the large landed estates of the boyars. An absolute majority of the Jews in Moldavia were Ashkenazic, intimately related through their common origin, language, names, and religious and secular customs to their "relatives" in Poland, Russia, and Germany, indeed in the whole vast region between the Baltic and the Black Sea, the region which the Swedish writer and translator Salomon Schulman calls "Yiddishland"<sup>24</sup> after the language which, for instance, 70 percent of the Jewish population in Romania defined as their

native language (though most Yiddish-speaking Jews also spoke Hungarian, German, and/or Romanian).

In the first half of the nineteenth century and even later the Moldavian Jews distinguished themselves by their special and unique dress,<sup>25</sup> showing the influence of the Turks and the surrounding milieu both by its different parts and by its colors. The men's workday dress consisted of a sleeveless coat decorated with frogs and worn over a white shirt. The trousers were wide and held by a large belt, which one finds among the Galician Jews as well. The head was covered by a bonnet made of light material, lined in cotton and sewn in squares. On holidays the men wore a long caftan that came to the ankles and had green and blue stripes; the caftan was closed around the neck by a frogged collar and buttons. The wide belt, like that of the Romanian peasants, held the handkerchief, spectacles, or tobacco pouch and, if need be, ink in a tin box and a holder for goose quills. Over the caftan they wore the *fermenea*, a coat of heavy stuff reaching down to the waist, lined in the winter and covered by another coat, the *giubea*, reaching to the ankles and sometimes lined with sable. Finally there was a long, wide cape in black rep silk, like that worn by monks. The head was covered by a cylindrical headdress of felt with a shawl turban of Turkish influence or a sable bonnet covered with velvet.

From the middle of the century, however, the special Moldavian holiday dress began to be replaced by the "Polish" costume under the influence of Jews coming from Galicia, who were more Orthodox: a simple black caftan, held at the waist by a black belt of embroidered silk. The classic *shtramel* was worn on the head, a bonnet with thirteen angles of sable fur. However, this costume soon disappeared in favor of "European" dress and was worn at the beginning of the twentieth century only by a minority of Orthodox Jews. The women's dress was in principle not different from that of non-Jewish women. On their head the women wore a fez with silk fringes tied together by a linen turban. In time the fez was replaced by a strip of satin covering the head. On their wedding day, according to tradition, the girls cut off their hair and covered their head with a fichu and later with a wig. In Wallachia, European men's dress was far more popular than in Moldavia by the end of the nineteenth century, and only a few Sephardic Jews wore the Polish caftan; only the rabbis wore the Turkish costume.

FIGURE 11.1

Orthodox Jews in Moinești

in the 1920s. Photo: Iosif

Berman. Muzeul Țăranului

Român, Bucharest.



Unlike in many other countries, the Jews in Romania never lived in traditional ghettos, although they constituted large majorities in the so-called Jewish quarters of the big cities, Văcărești and Dudești in Bucharest, Targul Cucului and Podul Ros in Iași. The houses didn't differ very much from similar houses in other parts of the city. Although there is no study in detail telling of the social structure and the role the Jews played in the economic development of Romania, one has good reason to suppose that the Jews were a majority among the artisans, merchants, and shopkeepers in Moldavia and that they consequently were considered as belonging to the urban middle classes. Before the anti-Semitic legislation was tightened, many Jews also owned theaters and cabarets and lent money especially in the small country towns and in the villages, where there were no banks. Only a few individual Jews were able to start or take part in bigger financial endeavors important to the country's economy; in particular cases some individuals were able also to start industrial companies of their own, while the absolute majority in the lower middle classes made their living from craft and trade, more or less isolated from the rest of society, for instance as tailors, shoemakers, pewterers, cabinetmakers, leatherworkers, turners, coachmakers, and stevedores. At the turn of the century the situation had slightly changed: a little more than 21 percent of the registered merchants were Jewish, while 19 percent of all craftsmen in Romania were Jewish. In Moldavia 75 percent of the Jews were still craftsmen of different kinds.

About 19 percent of all industrial workers in Romania were Jewish at the turn of the century, and this explains the fact that the new socialist ideas were so popular in the Jewish communities; two years before the extremely influential Bund movement was established in Russia in 1897, young Jewish socialists were gathering in the Lumina club in Iași, which must have been the prototype for Aron Sigalu, Petru Musoi, and Alexandru Tzaran when starting a similar club in Botoșani, even though Sigalu seems to have been the only Jew in the company. Remarkable also is the fact that the Lumina club's journal *Der Wecker* became the official mouthpiece of the Social Democratic Party, founded in 1893. The journal agitated strongly for equal civil and political rights independent of confession, thus attacking the relatively weak Romanian Zionism as well.

Despite the relative intellectual poverty in regard to secular matters due to official educational restrictions, the first Jewish newspaper in Romania started in Iași in 1855, in Yiddish, while the first Jewish newspaper in Romanian—and French—was published two years later. The first Jewish newspaper with editorial material solely in Romanian, *Vocea apărătorului*, was published in 1872, soon followed by a remarkable number of similar newspapers, most of them, however, relatively short-lived. Thanks to regular instruction in the synagogues, illiteracy was almost unknown among the men in the Jewish communities, while the girls were instructed at their homes and therefore had a complete mastery of Yiddish at least; most men had complete mastery of Hebrew as well. This was the case in general in Eastern and Central Europe and was, according to the French-Hungarian social historian Victor Karady, fundamentally important in regard to the region's process of modernization, within which the "free" professions available to the Jews were a kind of a prime mover regarding access to financial resources and the need for creative intellectual reflection.<sup>26</sup> At the turn of the century almost 9 percent of Hungarian civil servants and those engaged in "free" professions were Jewish, while the Jewish minority as a whole was only a little more than 4 percent of the population. In Romania 5 percent of the corresponding category were Jewish. In the 1920s more than half of the Hungarian judiciary was Jewish as were 40 percent of the engineers and the chemists and 33 percent of the journalists.

The incubator of this intellectual richness was the focusing of Jewish culture on the book, the text, and writing, in combination with the special social situation, two essential factors that came to play an enormous role in the emergence of the so-called modern sensibility. According to the distinguished Abraham Joshua Heschel,<sup>27</sup> especially the Eastern European Jews formed not merely a social group but a community, full of color and contrasts, uniform in its variety. The Jews were like a land with many provinces—Litvaks, Bessarabians, Ukrainians, and Galicians; Hasidim, Mithnagdim, Maskilim, Habadniks, Zionists, Agudists, and Socialists—one language with many dialects. Social existence was complex, frequently dominated by centrifugal forces, but there was a common center and, for the most part, also a common periphery. There was enough social dynamism to create specific and mutually related groupings; the passion for the unlimited could not always be conditioned by a regard for proportion and measure. A typical Jewish township in Eastern Europe

was a place where Torah had been studied “from time immemorial,” where practically all the inhabitants were scholars, where the synagogue or “house of study” was full of people of all classes busily engaged in studies. Poor Jews, whose children knew only the taste of “potatoes on Sunday, potatoes on Monday, potatoes on Tuesday,” sat there like intellectual magnates, possessing whole treasures of thought, a wealth of information, of ideas and sayings of many ages; when a problem came up, there was immediately a host of people pouring out opinions, arguments, quotations. In almost every Jewish home stood a bookcase full of volumes. Books were neither an asylum for the frustrated nor a means for occasional edification—they were “furnaces of living strength, time-proof receptacles for the eternally valid coins of spirit.”<sup>28</sup> To some people, it was impossible to pray without having been refreshed first by spending some time in the sublime atmosphere of the Torah. Others, after the morning prayer, would spend an hour with their books before starting to work.

In other words, it is hardly surprising that the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe played a decisive role in constituting modern centers of cultural production and consumption. In the background we regularly find Jewish intellectual and financial capital when looking, for instance, at the development of the modern press, the organization of theatrical and musical life, and the foundation and management of film studios and cinemas, private art and photo galleries, antique shops and bookshops, even such developments as indoor swimming baths, establishments for sports and games, cabarets, and coffee shops. The level of education, clearly above the average, was also one of the most important social and “technical” prerequisites for the intellectual energy constituting the sociological framework of assimilation. Here, at the core of the Jewish culture, European artistic and literary modernism was also born, spreading all over the continent, that modernism whose history is still unwritten. It is scarcely a coincidence determined by chance that the absolute majority of those giving birth to, representing, or supporting not only the Russian, Czech, Hungarian, and Polish avant-gardes but also the mature Romanian avant-garde in the 1920s and the 1930s had grown up in Jewish families, thus transmitting important elements of their culture into modernism, if not constituting it.

According to the Finnish writer and psychoanalyst Mikael Enckell, the encounter with Judaism and the tidal wave of creative efforts around the turn of the century, closely connected with Jewish culture, represented a cultural and artistic plateau

unique in the modern history of Europe and comparable only to ancient Greek culture and the Renaissance.<sup>29</sup> Einstein and Wittgenstein, Mahler, Schönberg, Chagall, Kafka, Proust, and Freud, all those guarantors of the continued vitality of European culture, they have all—more or less—started from the Jewish tradition. However, according to Enckell, the common predicament of this cultural boom was the experience of an empty space and a distancing from an earlier, closer, and more unproblematic content. Here Enckell, surprisingly enough, seems to join a more or less traditional Western European understanding, suggesting that it was precisely the distance from the Jewish intellectual culture to its traditional sources that gave birth to the cultural achievement. It is certainly true that the process of assimilation was well under way, especially in Western and Central Europe, but if we may speak of a mutual and therefore also fruitful relationship between the majority cultures and the Jewish one, it is scarcely the distance to the latter that may be held responsible for essential parts of the modernist wave, rather the reverse.

**EX Oriente**  
**DADA**

12





One of those born right in the middle of Central and Eastern European Jewishness (though he detested the environment he grew up in with all his heart) and actively participating in European modernism, including the Romanian avant-garde, was Aron Sigalu. Born in Iași, Sigalu grew up in Botoșani, one of the many small provincial towns in northern Moldavia; of its 25,000 inhabitants, more than 17,000 persons were officially registered as members of the Mosaic community in 1895, just about equally divided between the sexes. Almost 30,000 Jews were living in the district of Botoșani, which meant that the district was the third largest after Iași and Ilfov in regard to the number of Jews.<sup>1</sup> The town was almost entirely built of the two-story houses so typical of the region, with the shop on the ground floor and the family's apartment on the floor above; most of the houses were made of wood and only a few of stone, the latter owned by the bourgeoisie or by wealthy landlords. From a postcard, from around the turn of the century (see page 175), we can conclude that the streets lacked either asphalt or cobbles.

When the writer Eugen Hoeflich (who later took the name of Moshe Ya'akov Ben-Gavriel) describes the little town of Mukačevo in the border district between Moldavia and Russia in the German-Jewish journal *Das Zeit* at the turn of the century, he might in fact be describing Botoșani or Moinești, Samuel Rosenstock's town of birth.<sup>2</sup> According to Hoeflich, the first impression is that of a typical Jewish shtetl, where one meets, first of all, those Jewish coachmen in high boots, peasantlike costumes, and long curly locks. Quickly one discovers the gaudy signs outside the shops written in three, occasionally even four languages, signs constantly changing language and appearance, giving the painters a good living as the national disputes every now and then give reason to rewrite the signs in either somewhat bigger Latin, Russian, or Hebrew letters. At first the slightly Oriental street life is dominated almost totally by the Jews, but soon one discovers also some apparently Russian peasants and a few Christian townspeople. According to reliable reports, more than sixty percent of the entire population is Jewish. It is Friday morning and the town prepares itself for the Sabbath; people are picking up their purses and wallets, melons, meat, bread, and chickens are changing owners. What was saved during the week is now spent on necessary purchases in the marketplace and inside the market hall, mostly reminiscent of an Oriental bazaar crowded with shouting and screaming men and women, cackling hens, opened melons looking like bleeding wounds, neighing stamping

horses; everybody speaks Yiddish, and in the middle of the crowd one discovers the obligatory police constable with his rubber baton, easygoing and unaffected.

Hoeflich tells also that the religious life of the town, totally dominated by Hasidism, is in the hands of six zaddiks, whose existence guarantees that there are always more than enough problems and conflicts for a much bigger town than Mukačevo. All six zaddiks regularly fight each other, occasionally using physical force either in the square or at the inn. However, there is at least one thing upon which the community has agreed: the community has decided to open a Hebrew upper secondary school, according to Hoeflich something unprecedented and totally unique for such a small town, a refractory, courageous, and even revolutionary act against yesterday in favor of a conscious and intensified assimilation. The foundations have already been laid and the Hasids are standing beside shouting out their protests while others, knowing better that a true Zionism without the Jewish religion is as unthinkable as the Jewish religion without Zionism, are carrying the bricks, without getting any wages or other compensation. On the other side, ruled by the rabbis, one must, according to Hoeflich, appeal to conscience, let the children go to school and at the same time let them study the Talmud in the evenings, since Judaism is in danger of splitting into parts from inside. Precisely here, up in the Carpathian Mountains, where Judaism appears so strong and where there are so many flourishing Jewish towns and villages, precisely here unanimity is required in any case, mutual accommodation, compromises upon compromises.

In his unpublished autobiography, Arthur Segal remembered growing up in such an environment.<sup>3</sup> According to him, those living in Botoșani were stupid, narrow-minded, and full of prejudices and understood only the average and the mediocre. Is it possible, asked Segal, to imagine oneself actually living in such an environment as this godforsaken provincial Romanian town, and that he himself had developed in such contrast to prevailing standards that people considered him a total stranger?

Cousin Ernestine Sigalu's marriage is an illustration of the fact that almost every marriage between bourgeois Jewish families was a marriage of convenience with strong economic and dynastic implications. Ernestine Sigalu married Edward Lobel, managing director of a bank in Iași who was considered both rude and unintelligent, even stupid, uneducated, and coarse, but who was tremendously rich. The marriage ceremony took place at the Jewish club in Botoșani and was celebrated with an

abundant buffet full of non-Jewish delicacies, which almost none of the guests even touched, much less tasted, not even young Aron, who would gladly have liked to but didn't dare because of the others. Most of the food was given to the dogs—and the Christian servants. Aron's mother openly detested it and was cheerfully delighted when the chicken soup was served after the fish. The Orthodox Jews had fish as the first course, since a dinner without fish wasn't considered a dinner at all.

Aron's tutor, Mr. Süßmann, had himself written a book on "the Princess Sabbath" from which he read several chapters to young Aron, of which especially the chapter about Friday evening's ceremony stayed in his memory: the burning candles, the mumbling prayers, the good fish, the twisted bread, and the refreshing wine. In his autobiography Arthur Segal remembered his tutor as a real idealist, a true poetic nature, unbelievably shabbily dressed yet highly esteemed in the circles concerned, since he was considered a great expert on German literature and continental philosophy. Segal also remembered Mr. Süßman devoutly reciting some chapters from Jean Paul in which the author reflected on the spiritual masterpieces of art and literature and asked whether all this would really disappear in some distant future, whether those who had created such masterpieces had immortal souls after all. In such moments Mr. Süßman was totally mad, the sweat running down his cheeks and his hands trembling like an aspen leaf. At the same time, Segal thought that Mr. Süßmann was perhaps a little bit too sentimental and romantic and that the mixture of non-Jewish literature and Jewish sentimentality was an extremely peculiar combination.

Despite the fact that Segal's autobiographical remarks are characterized by a certain melancholy, probably related to the fact that he was remembering the life in the small Jewish country town from the distance of his own adulthood and that he may have felt that this world would soon disappear, though he couldn't possibly imagine the tragic way in which this would actually happen only a few years later—indeed, despite the moving melancholic tone, he states that he really hated the environment he grew up in and especially everything dealing with the "Jewish nation," since he simply detested nations and didn't want to belong to any. He hated going to the synagogue and detested the language—both Yiddish and Hebrew—as well as the Orthodox Jews in their long caftans and curly locks. The prayers didn't mean anything either; he was forced to mumble through one prayer after another, which he

thought was unspeakably boring, at the same time as he considered the customs and practices of other religions peculiar and incomprehensible as well. He remembered also with special detestation how at the age of thirteen he was forced to carry the small box containing the ten commandments—the tefillin—as well as the prescribed prayers he was forced to pray every morning in the company of his grandmother.

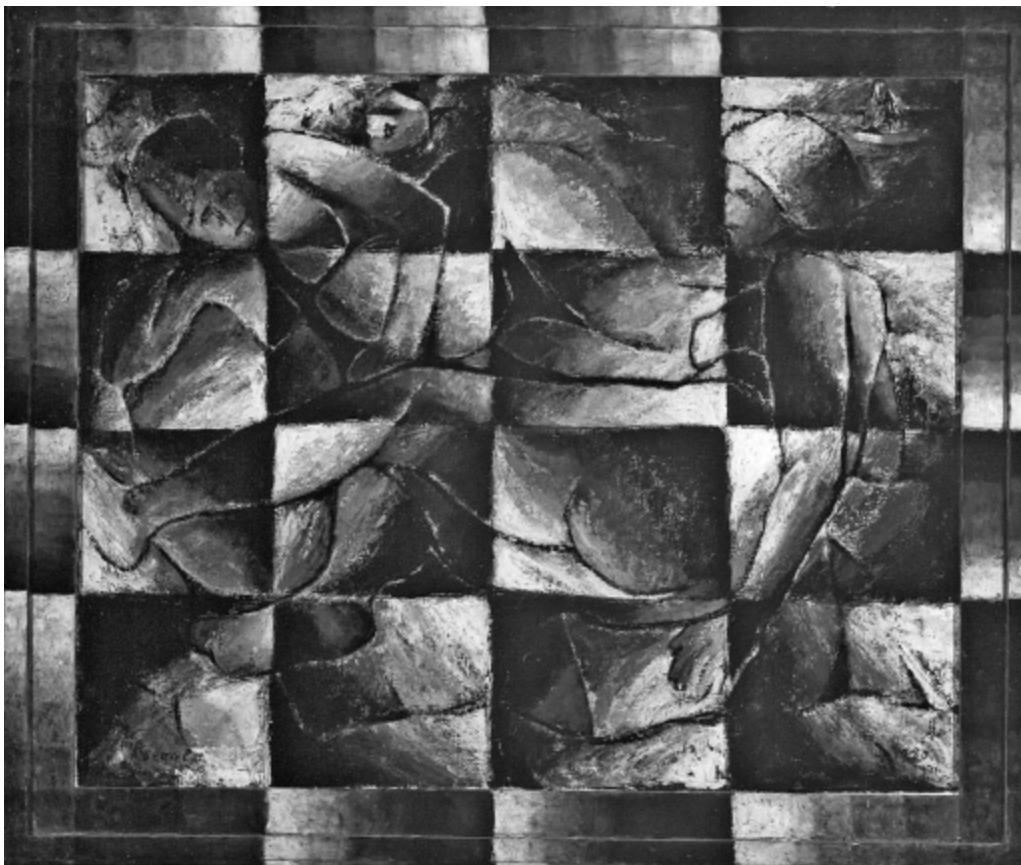
As mentioned before, people in Botoșani wondered then at the figure who suddenly appeared in the streets carrying the paintbox on his back with the palette in one hand and the canvas in the other, proudly setting off for the landscape to try to catch its passing beauty and charm. He painted like mad—cousin Regine was surprised when seeing his paintings and couldn't believe that Aron had done all this on his own. The Moldavian landscape is green, hilly, and beautifully changing; one has only to find the right motif. Reaching the outskirts, he made the choice: “a hilly meadow with white flowers and a group of trees, a hot summer sky in misty light. The air was vibrating and I saw white clouds on the blue sky. Everything was bathed in light and heat. The air was clear and smelled so sweet and I was fascinated. I felt myself in harmony and united with Nature. How can words explain my sensation and what one can achieve with colors?”<sup>4</sup>

The feeling of absorption by nature may of course have been caused by the fact that young Sigalu's tutor had imparted the general romantic code system, manifested for instance in Goethe, Schiller, Heine, and Jean Paul; but in relation to the young artist's social engagement and the older artist's synthetic notion of art, as well as his theories of *Gleichwertigkeit* and the light radiating from inside his painted images, it is not at all impossible but rather more than probable that Mr. Süßmann brought about other decisive impulses and ideas as well, ideas that were, so to speak, floating around in the surrounding environment and that had a specific impact on the religious life in Botoșani and the region. Mr. Süßmann wrote poems for instance—in German—about Jewish life and customs and belonged, like uncle Schaje, to a circle of Talmudists, cabalists, zaddiks, and “ordinary” Hasidim—all of them part of the Eastern European Hasidic movement, the extremely popular form of Jewish mysticism which, based on the teachings of Israel ben Eliezer, began under the leadership of Dov Baer of Mezhirech in mid-eighteenth-century Poland.<sup>5</sup> Israel ben Eliezer had been born in the small country town of Okopy at the Polish-Romanian border, lived his

whole life in the Carpathian border regions between Poland, Ukraine, and Romania, and became known as Baal Shem Tov or *besht*, “the master of the holy name,” a healer working with magic formulas, amulets, and sorceries, a kind of Jesus figure around whom people crowded to devote themselves to ecstatic prayers and to get spiritual guidance and about whom there was also an abundance of stories, one more fantastic than the other.

According to Amelia Pavel, it is also obvious that, for instance, Arthur Segal’s theories about the light in painting are permeated by cabalistic mysticism, as are his theories about the importance of balance and “synthetism” and his notion of art as an integrated element in the universe, in “Everything,” prophetic notions and ideas intimately linked to the Eastern European and particularly the northern Moldavian Jewish tradition, though Segal himself was never a practicing believer.<sup>6</sup> According to Pavel, there is no doubt either that Arthur Segal, inspired by the intellectual and artistic climate of Zurich and Ascona and later Berlin, where the Eastern European and especially the Russian influences were strong, tried to translate into a visual language those Hasidic ideas and metaphors that he had been confronted with in Botoșani.<sup>7</sup> Segal’s *Gleichwertigkeit* associates also with the Hasidic conception of the importance of “placing everything in its proper place” to achieve divine harmony. At the same time Segal was inspired by contemporary orphism as it had been shaped by Robert Delaunay and his wife Sonia Terk-Delaunay, the latter of whom was born in Ukraine and had a fundamental knowledge of the Hasidic culture. According to Pavel, Segal’s “orphic” pseudo-cubist paintings, where the painted surface continues beyond the frame, thus uniting the painting with the surrounding world instead of isolating it as an autonomous object, stand in an obvious relation to Hasidism and its “democratic” conception of the world. Here we have reason to supplement Pavel’s important argument: both Segal’s and Marcel Janco’s political engagement as well as Tristan Tzara’s stress on the nonhierarchical relationship between the elements of language and his “political” protest against classical culture point in the same direction. And didn’t Arthur Segal, for instance, paint Adam and Eve under the tree of knowledge in 1918, the paradisiacal state of being for which all creation longs and strives?

According to Gershom Scholem, Hasidism emphasizes with utmost force the pure spirituality and eternity of God’s being beyond all concepts and categories, giving God’s omnipotence the character of His immanence in the entire creation—



**FIGURE 12.1**

Arthur Segal, *Nude on the Shore*,

1920. Museum Ostdeutsche

Galerie Regensburg.

the world exists within Him and God is to be found in all aspects of life.<sup>8</sup> According to this form of mystical panentheism, the world's multiplicity is merely a veil preventing people from recognizing the true nature of things. Everything existing is a container or a vessel carrying the divine dynamic essence, the *hiyyuth*. In other words, all people are equal before God and before themselves in an ultimate, immovable harmony, a conviction which Arthur Segal applied to both art and society when refusing to acknowledge any other power beyond God, at the same time emphasizing the importance of the decentralized image and pointing at the point of ultimate tranquillity in the, in principle, nonhierarchical Egyptian art. The social and revolutionary engagement also goes hand in hand with Hasidism, which itself has been described as a revolution or rather as a rebellion of the masses against both the magnates and the rabbis controlling the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.<sup>9</sup>

Hasidism grew big unusually fast—in less than two generations—and soon became the dominating movement in the entire Polish-Russian Judaism, but never succeeded in taking root outside the Slavic countries and Romania, meeting extremely strong resistance among the Talmudists in Lithuania led by the cabalist Gaon Elijah of Vilnius. By around 1800 the movement had achieved organized leadership, a productive literary activity, well-defined communities, and a more or less established position within the general structures of Jewish life. In general terms the movement may be described as a deeply rooted popular love movement building upon the individual, often ecstatic meeting with the divine intermediated by the zaddik, the *axis mundi* of spiritual life, the charismatic leader and intermediary between the individual and God. The zaddik is responsible for carrying the prayers of the community up to the divine spheres, thus comparable to Segal's pharaoh in the Egyptian image, before whom the other figures bow and from whom the inner light emanates and spreads equally out in reality.

According to the contemporary witness Alexander Eliasberg, there were about one hundred wonder-working zaddiks in Galicia, Volhynia, and Bukovina in the 1910s, to whom the members of the Hasidic communities had to go on a pilgrimage at least three times a year.<sup>10</sup> Eugen Hoeflich in his story about Mukačevo tells of a Friday evening at Rabbi Menasheh's home: about one hundred Hasidim have set themselves at two tables, between which Rabbi Menasheh, not too old and with an incomprehensibly honest face, is sitting on a small platform. A strong ardent feeling

of togetherness reigns in the room, every eye is directed toward the mouth of the zaddik and every heart beats in time to his heart. Everybody sides with everybody. Holy Rabbi! What a depth, what an endless humbleness! Rabbi Menasheh, who doesn't know anything about the political struggles or conflicts of the day or about the problems caused by the other zaddiks, slowly raises his hand, the whispers are stilled, a silent reverence advances slowly through the room. The zaddik begins mumblingly to pray while the others shake hands with their eyes shut; after the prayer the zaddik quietly eats the food on the plate in front of him while the others eat from his hand.<sup>11</sup>

According to Gershom Scholem, the elimination or rather the neutralization of messianism is most important for understanding Hasidism, which on the whole means that the adherents of the new revivalist movement agreed that it was better to cleave to God in exile than in Palestine.<sup>12</sup> The mysticism of individual, personal life is put at the center; for instance almost every concept in the cabala is experienced as referring to the personal life of the individual, and those concepts lacking such references are meaningless and empty, while those linked to the individual relationship to God are intensified. In other words, Hasidism is “the cabala transformed into ethos” and stresses over and over the moral and ethical duties of the individual. The most important thing for the Hasidim was “cleaving to God,” *devekut*, by the old cabalists considered an ecstatic state, in the Hasidic movement a central concept involving the annihilation of the individual ego of the zaddik and for the ordinary Hasidic Jew a continuing sense of the presence of God, the “sweet father”; *devekut* was considered the first step to absorption, the point of departure for the everyday spiritual life out in society. For the Hasidim every day is a holy day and every action a prayer.

The royal road to *devekut* is the contemplative prayer, described also as the spiritual message par excellence of Hasidism aiming at total unity with the divine Nothingness. In the hierarchy of spiritual duties this prayer became, like *devekut* itself, even more important than Torah study. Unlike those outside the movement who conducted their prayers at certain times of the day, the Hasidim considered every time equal and declared that one didn't have to follow certain prescriptions of how the prayer had to be conducted. In the silent talk with one's neighbor one may find the way to God as well as in the prayer. *Sefer ha-Zohar* and especially the stories telling of the great zaddiks were more important than the Talmud and the other books and texts fostered within Jewish Orthodoxy; alongside the hymns and the



psalms the stories were widely used in the education of children and in the schools, which meant also that Hasidic school children had very little knowledge of the Talmud and the commentaries. The importance of the psalms is illustrated by the fact that the Hasidim read ten chapters from the book of Psalms every day after each prayer and all the chapters on the Sabbath.

The prayers were combined with certain movements of the body to promote concentration, and there are innumerable examples in Hasidism of extremely strong, ecstatic movements and gestures during the prayer, for instance turning somersaults as a kind of physical metaphor of “turning oneself upside-down,” or clapping hands, shaking laterally, or speaking in tongues. Particularly in Galicia, where Hasidism was considered most conservative, the prayer was conducted loudly and boisterously, with noise and whimpering, running to and fro with strong gestures, shouting and crying. The Hasid was also able to cleave to God directly through bodily actions like eating, drinking, and having sexual encounter; the Hasidic emphasis on adoration through bodily actions is legitimized by the conviction that even the lowest matter is an aspect of God and that evil may be transformed by meeting with it in its own field in terms of divine ecstasy and “divine intoxication.”

The highest form of ecstasy is pure fear of God and is identical with love for him. The soul is filled with love sweeping away everything belonging to the earth and everything egoistic, and love itself is often described in terms of pure erotic love at the same time as the ascetic ideal is evoked as self-denial and self-forgetfulness. According to Scholem, we meet with the ancient moral ideal of *ataraxi*, freedom from passion and equanimity, the ideal of both the Stoics and the Cynics which Talmudic literature had already made Jewish.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Diogenes is defined as one of the major representatives of Cynical philosophy is not without significance in the Hasidic context, in which the unity with the universe often was formulated in terms of different provocative actions, words, and gestures and which may have worked as a paradigmatic example to any dadaist acquainted with it. Already in the generation after Baal Shem Tov a group of Hasidim would mock the Torah-learned Talmudists, make fun of them, and put them to shame, turning somersaults in public and allowing themselves all kinds of mischief.

The Romanians at Cabaret Voltaire could not have avoided an acquaintance with the more or less fantastic stories and legends circulating around the great

zaddiks in both the Hasidic tradition and in contemporary religious life, stories of heavenly flights, wonder-working amulets, “absurd” miracles, and divine revelations.<sup>14</sup> Already Baal Shem Tov was said to be a true master of practical cabala, a magician, at the same time as his successors were subjected to legends, stories, and anecdotes, all of which were characterized by a peculiar mixture of trivialities and profundity, borrowed thoughts and true originality. On his return from his ascetic loneliness in the mountains Baal Shem was considered insane, dressing himself in white during the Sabbath, eating and drinking and enjoying himself, while living an extremely ascetic life during the rest of the week. He himself thought it was totally normal that he was able to talk to the heavenly forces and to cure sick persons, since he refused to believe in any border between the natural and the supernatural.

Telling stories about the zaddiks had almost a religious value itself, and the act of telling was a kind of religious rite, for instance those told of Issachar Ber of Radoszyce, called the “Holy Grandfather,” tremendously renowned for his ability to exorcise bad spirits with the help of an unspeakable mixture consisting of everything from left-over oil from the Hanukkah lamps, wine from the cups for kiddush, challah bread, palm twigs left from the Feast of Tabernacles, wax from the Yom Kippur candles, and not least ordinary water from his own well; sometimes the sick didn't have to visit the holy grandfather in person to be cured anyway.

When Tristan Tzara, who like Arthur Segal was born and grew up in a region where Hasidism prevailed, tells in his autobiographical remarks of 1923 that as a young boy he dreamed of losing his personality and becoming impersonal, that in his first Romanian poems he was already trying to save himself from every fixed opinion and that he had always considered himself a *colporteur* in words, just a person turning images and sentences inside out,<sup>15</sup> it is difficult not to associate this with the Hasidic doctrine of the importance of the obliteration of the self and giving up one's identity only to discover it on a higher level. Paradoxically enough this doctrine was linked to the body and its pleasures. Already by the end of the eighteenth century a contemporary observer—Salomon Maimon—gave witness to a “new sect” that didn't try to liberate its members from earthly occupations and enjoyments but had a positive attitude toward bodily needs and sensuous pleasures, while also believing that the true service of God is to get rid of the self. The object was to achieve a state of nothingness,

the 'Ayin, i.e., to experience and feel an undifferentiated unity with God beyond reason and logic, and this state could be reached through ecstatic dances and songs, for instance by endless recitations of the Jewish confession of faith or other texts until the text lost its meaning and was transformed into an incomprehensible rattling off or babbling—as when Tzara, Marcel Janco, and the other dadaists read their nonsense poems consisting of letters in a row and fragments of sentences without any comprehensible syntactic order. Undoubtedly one of the sources of inspiration must have been the surrounding Hasidism when Tzara already around 1914 tried to liberate the words from their lexical meaning at the same time as he tried to create “abstract” poems of pure sounds without mimetic references to reality.

Although neither the Rosenstock family nor the Iancu family confessed Jewish Orthodoxy or Hasidism,<sup>16</sup> the abundant use of, for instance, automatic speech and ecstatic sorceries in connection with Hasidic prayers makes it more than possible that both Samuel Rosenstock and the Iancu brothers witnessed personally the act that the believing Hasidim defined as “inspired speech,” as if God himself talked to them through the zaddik, emptied of his own personality and identity. The ecstatic prayer rises up to God through different stages, of which the highest is characterized by a will higher than the intellect, beyond reason and knowledge, the entire being of the surrendered zaddik so absorbed that nothing is left, not even his self-consciousness. Logical rationality is turned upside down, everything is equally allowed and forbidden, even sexual excesses as well as intoxication and “abnormal,” offensive, scandalous, and even strongly provocative social behavior. The referential function of the language (to refer to “empirical” reality outside language itself) collapses in the same way as the offensive behavior threatens the “normal” system of social codes as soon as this behavior is not sanctioned within the frames of the religious rite.

Samuel Rosenstock's development toward the nullified subject—or rather the desubjectified literary subject—may have been caused by several simultaneous and collaborating factors and impulses, among them both the fact that the young writer was born and grew up within the Romanian-Jewish culture, characterized by Hasidism, and the fact that, born in a remarkable multilingual environment, he was soon to replace Romanian with French. In regard to August Strindberg, who also replaced his own native language with French during a short but literarily decisive time, the Swedish literary scholar Arne Melberg has suggested a careful but highly in-

interesting explanation of Strindberg's experiments with the basic elements of literature and his move toward modernist dramatic art<sup>17</sup> which seems worth trying on Samuel Rosenstock as well, the poet who changes his name to Tristan Tzara and begins writing in French. As Melberg recommends in regard to Strindberg, we may, in other words, catch sight of the character of Tzara's development by defining his first poetic experiments as a component part of a *désœuvrement* in Maurice Blanchot's sense of the word,<sup>18</sup> a fundamental move for modernist literature. According to Melberg, Strindberg leaves and dissolves the literary work already when he bids farewell to his native language to try to write in French, and, furthermore, to try to write "anti-literature" in French. The work is dissolved in favor of "smaller" and specifically experimental forms of literature: minutes, reports, *causeries*, diaries, and "poems in prose." Above all the work is left by, so to speak, Strindberg's desubjectifying of himself, which also recalls Tzara dreaming of losing his own personality and becoming impersonal. Like Strindberg, Tzara no longer cultivates some romantic or realistic figuration, but the main impression is that of *désœuvrement*: he "nullifies" himself, he doesn't rule any more but lets himself be ruled by "the multiplicity of signs and angles which gushes over the nullified," as Melberg says of Strindberg. For Tzara, this process seems to originate not only in just about the same French sources (mediated by Romanian symbolism) as inspired Strindberg, but also and especially in the closeness to Hasidic mysticism during his childhood and its emphasis on the nullified subject in order to, so to speak, liberate the language from its expressionist past in the expressing of the personal subject.

Regarding the Hasidic or generally mystic ecstatic rapture achieved, for instance, by the help of repeated recitations of hymns, prayers, and fragments of prayers, more and more emptied of referential meaning, or by the help of monotonously proceeding meditations upon particular letters, original, often bizarre phrases, combinations of words, and linguistic innovations, the Swedish scholar Antoon Geels points at the cognitive shift, which according to him can best be recognized as a continuum, between the consciousness when awake and the state of dreaming or sleeping.<sup>19</sup> According to the American literary scholar John D. Erickson, this is precisely what characterizes the dadaist discourse as well, resembling the dreamwork, a work that is identified in Dada as the fully visible "poetic work," the transforming of the discourse by condensations and displacements—a thought that Tristan Tzara seems also to

confirm when he says that the poet is helped by his dreams in trying to make reality as confusing as it actually is: the dadaist displaces the discourse, dislodges it, dissolves it and consciously rejects its referentiality.<sup>20</sup> The discourse formulated from a “normal” position of the subject is blocked by semantic incompatibilities between words and groups of words though these are neither incomprehensible nor ungrammatical by themselves. The automatic aspect is forced upon the reader—or the listener—by the fact that the mimetic impulse is impudently weakened or totally rejected: the referentiality of the textual surface is reduced to what would be called obvious nonsense in other, normal contexts.

There is one more factor worth reflecting upon in regard to Samuel Rosenstock’s dream of the impersonal self and the desubjectified subject, in principle able to be replaced by an entirely new identity, a new personality. Eastern European Judaism, including that of Bukovina, Bessarabia, Moldavia, and Wallachia, was characterized by an extremely small number of rich or wealthy Jewish families, a still small number of families belonging to the middle classes, and an excess of poor and extremely poor families, of which only a few were affected by the process of assimilation linked to modernity which more widely influenced the Jewish population in Western and Central Europe. Though young Rosenstock’s school reports from both the school in Moinești and the Mihai Viteazul upper secondary school in Bucharest define his nationality as “Israelite” and his confession as “Mosaic,”<sup>21</sup> the Rosenstock family apparently belonged to the “francophile” layers and to those who tried to assimilate into Romanian society despite the difficulties. This is an effort that Victor Karady defines as a complex and multidimensional creative act, an attempt to acquire the language, the food culture, the dressing, the lifestyle, and the education of the majority, which more or less automatically and implacably leads to the feeling of a kind of double belonging.<sup>22</sup> This experience is by no means weakened by the surrounding anti-Semitism and the distancing gaze of the “other,” where the “other” may be oneself as well as one’s non-Jewish neighbor, the clerk at the office, or one’s business companion, which in turn leads to self-control and introspection. According to Karady, this doubleness contains also an intellectual element, impossible to overestimate, which derives from the multilingual environment, among other things, and which at the same time is characterized by the need to “keep the door open,” by the effort of

preserving one's Jewish origin in some way or other; this promotes a specific social, intellectual, and emotional competence and a system of values supporting the multilingual capacity and the cultural mobility in and between many cultures. According to Karady, the assimilation is never a finished process but a creative transformation of the public personality aiming at improving one's social status, which corresponds also with Tristan Tzara's testified longing for fame and credit, perhaps his equally attested ruthlessness in the promotion of his own "career" as well. When Samuel Rosenstock "nullifies" the subject in his encounter with Romanian symbolism at the same time as he meets and begins to interact with Eugen Iovanaki and the Iancu brothers, like himself Jews belonging to more or less assimilated Jewish families, and when a few years later he meets with Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and Hans Arp in Zurich, his—and the Iancu brothers'—efforts seem almost overexplicitly to confirm Karady's analysis of the process of assimilation, according to which the assimilated identity, once well along, is constituted according to a model characterized by a higher degree of modernity than the accepted social model. The fact that Tzara as far as is known never directly or immediately referred to his Jewish cultural origin also seems to confirm Karady's indication of the resistance of the assimilated Jews to the conservative "Eastern Jews," according to Karady a kind of masochistic self-hate against the original identity. And doesn't Tzara poke fun at both himself and the cliché of the poor Eastern Jew as constantly peddling clothier when in 1920 he urges us to buy clothes from Aa, Tzara's alter ego, Aa who gives a 25 percent discount and who has blue eyes as well, at the same time as he indirectly identifies this Aa with the cynic Diogenes when he says that dogs too have blue eyes?<sup>23</sup> In the same manifesto of Mr. Aa the antiphilosopher he seems also to play the same hide-and-seek as so many contemporary assimilated Jews did, doing everything possible to melt into the culture of the majority while fighting a bad conscience over the self-deception in regard to their own cultural origin:

*Take a good look at me!*  
*I am an idiot, I am a clown, I am a faker.*  
*Take a good look at me!*  
*I am ugly, my face has no expression, I am little.*  
*I am like all of you!*<sup>24</sup>

Tzara seems to address himself both to the non-Jewish majority and indirectly to Jews not yet assimilated when he recommends that they not do what he himself has done, at the same time as he seems to reveal his own strategy of hiding his “real” identity:

NO MORE LOOKS!

NO MORE WORDS!

Stop looking!

Stop talking!

*For I, chameleon transformation infiltration with convenient attitudes—  
multicolored opinions for every occasion dimension and price—*

*I do the opposite of what I suggest to others.*<sup>25</sup>

If the language at home was Romanian, which seems to be confirmed by Tzara’s letters to his parents in Bucharest, Samuel Rosenstock must have spoken Yiddish as well since this was the first language among many if not the majority of the Jews in Moldavia and since he went to the “Israelite” school in Moinești, where the language of instruction in several subjects must still have been Yiddish despite the fact that this had become more and more unusual after 1866.<sup>26</sup> Aron Sigalu in turn could scarcely have had any daily intercourse with family or friends in Botoșani without having at least some mastery of Yiddish, and young Rosenstock too must have known at least the most common daily phrases in this peculiar composite language (specifically from its southern Russian dialect, which predominated in Romania, northeastern Hungary, eastern Galicia, and Bukovina).<sup>27</sup> According to Heschel, this “dadaist” language is a direct expression of feeling, a mode of speech without ceremony or artifice, a language that speaks itself without taking devious paths; in this language, you say “beauty” and mean “spirituality,” you say “kindness” and mean “holiness.”<sup>28</sup> According to Salomon Schulman, precisely like Romanian, Yiddish is a fusion language, a kind of melting pot of different linguistic elements, of which approximately two-thirds derive from Middle High German, about fifteen percent from Hebrew, and about ten percent from different Slavic languages.<sup>29</sup> In one word the prefix, the suffix, the word stem, and the plural ending may have different origins, which gives the language a peculiar flexibility and a unique richness of nuances.

Yiddish is not a linguistic mishmash more than any other language, though the collage technique is more obvious, like the unusually large vocabulary: Yiddish was one of the most extensive native languages in Europe, enriched by the many cultural and linguistic contacts with the neighboring cultures and languages. An example is the use of the many forms of diminutives. To express “little Josef” one has several possibilities: the friendly affectionate *Joschke* or the more attached respectful *Sozifl* or the more intimate *Josel* or *Josche*, the loving *Josele* or the tenderly loving *Josenyu*, *Josinke*, *Josinkele*, *Joschkele*, *Joschenyu*, or *Joschkeneyu*. If one wishes to give this little Josef even more attributes, the adjectives can be inflected in different forms of diminutives, as can the verbs telling what *Joschkeneyu* is doing, sleeping for instance: *schlofenyu*. The fact that the Romanian dadaists loved to experiment with language is not to be wondered at, given the obvious phonetic similarities between Yiddish and their bruitist poems. Yiddish, as well as Hebrew, the language of the rabbis and the synagogue, is also interesting in regard to Samuel Rosenstock’s pseudonym (whose meaning in Romanian might be “sad in his own country”): in Yiddish the word *tzure* means “misery”; in Hebrew the same word is pronounced *tsara* or *tzara*.<sup>30</sup>

Yiddish was not only a language, it was an entire culture. If Hebrew was long the refined, aristocratic language, the written language par excellence, the language of the educated, Yiddish was the language of ordinary people. If all services were conducted in Hebrew and most males were expected to be able to read the Talmud and the Torah, Yiddish was the everyday language in the small country towns, the language of the Hasidim, the folksongs, the stories, and the legends—and soon the language of modern popular literature and theater as well. Yiddish was also and especially the language of the modern political and cultural history of Europe, the language of modernity, of the social reform movements, the language of national rebellions, the language of the revival of both secular rationality and popular religion, the language that sometimes was eulogized and elevated, sometimes mocked at and scornfully rejected as “jargon” or double Dutch. Despite the visual appearance of the Hasidim’s black caftans and screw locks, Yiddish culture became the nursery of a great deal of European modernism, which is confirmed also by the fact that, for instance, Russian futurism has its major roots in the multifold Yiddish world<sup>31</sup> in about the same way as we may suggest that Tristan Tzara’s and the Janco brothers’ dadaism



is related to this culture and its variants as well. It cannot be a coincidence, for instance, that the new modernist aesthetics emerged in Russia directly in connection with the *Mir Iskusstva* movement and the contemporary interest in different forms of popular culture, an interest realized for instance by the big ethnographic expedition organized by the Jewish Academy and the University of St. Petersburg in 1912 to towns and villages in Volhynia and Podolia. David Günzburg and Vladimir Stassof's *L'ornement hébreu* of 1905, a collection of illuminated prints of medieval origin, would become immoderately popular among Jewish ethnographers and inspire, among others, Eliezer (El) Lissitzky almost at the same time as Marc Chagall returned to his own Jewish roots in Hasidism. A decade later, in 1919, the artist Issachar Ryback, who had studied Jewish popular art and the wooden synagogues along the Dniepr together with Lissitzky before the revolution, linked modern abstract and futurist art directly to Yiddish culture and explained in an article published in the Yiddish journal *Oifgang*, written with the artist Boris Aronson, that the abstract visual image as such is determined by "the Jewish nation and race."<sup>32</sup> Ryback and Aronson declared also that Jewish artists prefer dark tones and nuances instead of glaring colors and that they have a special talent for velvet black, violet, gray, and golden, colors corresponding with the pious Jews' predilection for velvet and satin, the material of the prayer shawls, the Torah mantles, and the Torah curtain, according to Harry Seiwert something that associates also with Marcel Janco's painting displaying saturated, dark, and blended colors, at the same time as Janco puts the emphasis on the graphic line and drawing in common with the so-called Jewish renaissance in Russia in 1920–1928.<sup>33</sup> Although Janco never admitted any dependence on Jewish culture for his own art and even denied the existence of a specific national Jewish art, he would actively take part in the creation of international modernism out of his own Jewish origin. Remarkable also is Arthur Segal's use of dark colors in combination with the inner light of the depicted objects and figures.

Another example close to Dada of the importance of the Jewish origin around the turn of the century is of course Franz Kafka, obviously inspired by the so-called *Heikhalot* mysticism and its conception of human life as an ascending through heavenly halls and court labyrinths guarded by zealous doorkeepers.<sup>34</sup> His writing displays an unflinching ability, recalling the collage-like character of Yiddish culture, to blend everyday realism with quasi-dadaist grotesqueries and bizarreries, dreams with real-

ity, and a prose clear as glass with expressive hyperboles, peculiar images, and absurd metaphors. Kafka's knowledge of and fascination with Hasidism show a consciousness of a specific inner affinity. Kafka's unmistakable ties to the Yiddish culture and at the same time to the language itself are confirmed also by the lecture he delivered at the Jewish city hall in Prague in February 1912 in which he defined Yiddish as a language completely consisting of foreign words without a grammar, words as hasty and lively as they were when they were taken into the language. According to Kafka, the Jewish migration runs through this language—the Jewish “jargon”—from one end to the other. Curious and light-hearted persons have tried to discern all the German, Hebrew, French, English, Slavic, Dutch, Romanian, and Latin elements of the language, with no success, he says; it is impossible to understand, for instance, a poem in Yiddish if one only gives an account of its content, since the language cannot simply be translated, it must be experienced.<sup>35</sup>

In this Yiddishland there were neither emperors nor constables, says Salomon Schulman, only an unprecedented cultural multiplicity, a boundless multilingual reality, a linguistic playfulness, satirical attacks against supposed intellectuality, and a unique ability to recognize the logic in madness and transform logic into madness. Here one might carry life to extremes and acknowledge one's own exposed nakedness at the moment one recognized the emperor's new clothes. The Yiddish world did not only interpret, Schulman says: here lie and truth lived so close to each other that the relation with the absurd was no longer considered problematic, it became itself a way of living.<sup>36</sup> According to Arthur Hertzberg and Aron Hirt-Manheimer, the most fundamental trait at the core of the Jewish character, which forms the culture, is the otherness itself, the constant insisting on being different and chosen, rebellious and outside.<sup>37</sup> Historically the Jews have always and in all contexts by definition challenged the dominant dogmas and the cultures around them, from the very beginning when Abraham broke the idols of his father, up through Baal Shem Tov attacking the Orthodox Talmudists to Kafka in Prague and Freud in Vienna challenging the seemingly self-evident beliefs and values of conventional society. At the same time as the Jews have tried to maintain and preserve a specifically other culture in relation to the surrounding cultures, they have always also striven for acceptance by the others. In other words, at the heart of Judaism there is a specific paradoxical doubleness, a

both-and instead of an either-or, which is also the incomparably most important “ideological” element of Dada. Consequently there is a kind of collage of mutually conflicting signals, messages, ideas, and thoughts held together by the understanding that the truth and the lie are two sides of the same coin, that paradox is the quintessence of life, its definition as such. In relation to Western rationality demanding logical coherence and verification, the fundamentally creative and “happy” absurdity is obvious just about in the same way as when Tristan Tzara explains in his Dada manifesto of 1918 that he is against writing manifestos and against all kinds of principles, that he writes the manifesto only to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking a gulp of fresh air.<sup>38</sup> When we say “ideal, ideal, ideal, knowledge, knowledge, knowledge, boomboom, boomboom, boomboom,” we have, according to Tzara, pretty faithfully given the dadaist attitude: logic is wrong and has failed. “There is no ultimate Truth,” Tzara declares: the dialectic is an amusing mechanism that guides us in a banal kind of way to the opinion we had in the first place. Tzara detests “greasy objectivity” and harmony, the science that finds everything in order. The most acceptable system is on principle to have none and at the same time to “perfect oneself in one’s own littleness, to fill the vessel with one’s individuality,” as any zaddik would agree on the importance of emptying oneself to be able to fill one’s soul and one’s heart. It is a matter of nullifying oneself and letting things happen like life as such—as Tzara is saying in his manifesto of feeble and bitter love in 1920:

*To make a dadaist poem*

*Take a newspaper.*

*Take a pair of scissors.*

*Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.*

*Cut out the article.*

*Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.*

*Shake it gently.*

*Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.*

*Copy conscientiously.*

*The poem will be like you.*

*And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.*<sup>39</sup>

In fact, one must admit that this attitude of protesting, absurd from a pure Western rational point of view, is not only characteristic of the Jewish way of perceiving life and existence but also resembles the typical Romanian behavior as described by Mircea Vulcănescu in the early 1940s.<sup>40</sup> According to him, the Romanian is a born opponent; Romanian negation is not existential, it is essential. The Romanian always opposes a mode of being, not being in itself. The Romanian, according to Vulcănescu, is essentially a concessive spirit. If you outline to him a plan you mean to be right about, he will not allow you to be completely right but only right in perspective. Every time the Romanian denies something, saying “it is not,” his denial is only relative. It should always be assumed that this means “it is not here,” or “it is not there,” or “it is not yet.” Even when he says that something does not exist at all, the Romanian does not deny its being. The most common answer to a negative question is also “ba da,” which means “on the contrary, by no means, not at all, yes,” proving that the pure negation can always be conjugated in Romanian in the affirmative. Furthermore, the Romanian knows the word “true” only to distinguish between real and unreal. The “ba,” representing an active denial, is confronted with the “da,” an active affirmation denying that there is a nothingness instead of a multiplicity of alternatives.

It is hardly a coincidence that both Zionism and the socialist Bund movement were stirring the masses in the small Jewish country towns in Central and Eastern Europe to ask new questions about Jewish identity, national belonging, and the possibilities of political revolt against prevailing circumstances, at the same time as modern Yiddish literature triumphed around the turn of the century, a breakthrough which, according to Salomon Schulman, was a breaking-out from the Orthodox celebration of morals and the tight laws of the Old Testament.<sup>41</sup> The pastoral hills of the biblical landscape were torn to pieces as possible metaphors and instead living people were forced into the books, people who spoke an unbiblical and impudent Yiddish instead of solemn Hebrew and who made fun of each other, heckled each other, had sexual intercourse with each other, wrangled and loved each other, were stealing and cheating, smelled of dirt and poverty, at the same time as they carried with them the entire Jewish

treasure of culture and education and its intellectual conception of the world. An enormous zest for life was forced into the shtetl together with an equally insatiable curiosity about the non-Jewish world and reality—the door of the shtetl was set ajar, and before this door was shut with a terrible bang the Yiddish culture had already tasted European modernism, contemporary ideologies, and all of the intellectual illusions offered by the new century. The meeting takes place in Yiddish literature, Schulman says, the meeting with the ancient Jewish, with the rabbinical, with poverty, with philosophy, and with messianic modernity.

Yiddish literature is difficult to categorize according to established criteria of classification;<sup>42</sup> one might come closest by defining it as a kind of popular realism within which the author is not a recording viewer but an actor or participant and whose fundamental idea is to mirror society as a model of understanding. The first books in Yiddish were published as early as the sixteenth century and were a sort of religious “fiddler’s literature,” for instance the first translation of the psalms in 1586 and a huge number of biblical paraphrases telling, for instance, King David’s life and adventures and the history of the Jewish people from the exodus through the Babylonian captivity. The most influential and widespread book in Yiddish up to the end of the nineteenth century was Jakob ben Isaak Ashkenazi’s *Tsena urena*, a free revision of the five books of the Pentateuch and other biblical stories with exegetic commentaries and parts of the cabala, of which the first edition was published in Lublin around 1600. Parallel to edifying literature, so-called fiddler’s literature was distributed, mainly written or created by touring fiddlers and writing book-travelers; this literature worked as a kind of popular news service offering fresh news, funny stories, epic poems, and stories containing elements from both chivalrous epics and Oriental tales and legends. By the end of the sixteenth century anonymous “folkbooks” appeared, of which the best known up to the mid-nineteenth century was *Ma’asse-Buch*, published in 1602, a collection of stories, anecdotes, legends, and tales, among others some thirty miracle stories of medieval origin telling of the teachers and mystics Rabbi Samud and his son Rabbi Judah. Another example is *Kuh-Buch*, published in 1594, a collection of fables of Hebraic origin about, for instance, two red deer looking as if they were whispering secrets to each other but who are perhaps only bored.

The era of greatness of Yiddish literature first began with oral, later written stories, anecdotes, and allegories about the great zaddiks spread at the beginning of the nineteenth century, especially about Baal Shem Tov and Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, stories to which many of the authors in the twentieth century still referred. A great deal of nineteenth-century literature was addressed to women, who usually didn't know Hebrew and who often read, for instance, Israel Aksenfeld's humoristic but at the same time edifying story *dass schterentichel*, printed in 1861 and explicitly addressed to "di prosste jiden," the "simple Jews," or the verse drama *der erschter jidischer rekrut in russland*. Salomon Ettinger's comedy *ssekerke*, published in 1861, was also popular, a comedy circulating around a female Tartuffe in Lemberg, though the comedy was never as well-liked as Isaak Meir Dik's popular, realistic stories published in more than 400 booklets in editions of more than 100,000 copies. The pseudonymous Schomer's colportage novels were almost as popular; Schomer is described as a very honest man but extremely dishonest as an artist, totally indifferent to whether he was writing new texts of his own or was only copying stories of others, often displaying an obvious predilection for fantastic and effectful exaggerations, stories in which the main characters are almost always counts and countesses and in which love always wins in the end. Jakob Dineson wrote about "seen and heard life," while, for instance, Mordechaj Sspektor combined elements from both the love and the crime novel; in *der jiddischer muschik*, for instance, published in 1894, he has his hero move to the country to become a peasant, where everything of course goes wrong for the poor merchant, whose son finally is murdered by a Christian landlord as a result of jealousy, greed, and envy. The wide readership could also thoroughly enjoy all the invectives by which Isaak Joel Linecki attacks Hasidic fanatic sanctimoniousness in the novel *doss pojliche jingel*, published in the Jewish magazine *kol mevasser* in 1869; the author turns to the editor and attacks the hypocrisy of the mystics with the help of satirical, humoristic, and merciless words of abuse in a text, furthermore, filled with untranslated Russian words and sentences.

The first explicitly modern Yiddish writer is said to be Mendele Mojcher Ssforim, who was very familiar with the language and modes of expression of the Eastern European Jews from his extensive travels.<sup>43</sup> According to him, satire was the best means of education of the pious skeptic, and since he loved the Jews with all his heart he decided to choose satire as his major genre in, for instance, the play *di takse*,

published in 1869, in which the author with flowing irony heckles the hypocrisy and corruption in the Jewish communal administration and the ruling layers in the fictitious town of Glupsk, who pretend to improve the “welfare of the people” when in reality they are thinking of increasing their own power and laying hands on as much money and property as possible. The novel *fischke der krumer*, published in the same year, does not have any regular plot but is instead composed as a long series of characteristic, unsparingly realistic but at the same time inordinately satirical episodes telling of a book-traveler and his adventures along with his friend Reb Alter in southern Russia, while the novel *massojess binjomin haschlischi*, published in 1878, about “the travels and adventures of Benjamin the third,” tells of Benjamin of Tudela who travels to distant countries together with a down-to-earth friend, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, to find out the exact day of the return of Messiah; of course they don’t travel farther than to the closest neighboring village.

The most renowned and popular of all the Yiddish authors by the end of the nineteenth and in the beginning of the twentieth century was also the most merciless of all humorists and satirists, namely Sholem Rabinowitz, who took the pseudonym Sholem Aleichem after the common words of greeting (*sholem aleichem*, peace be upon you) and of whom it was told that his absurd laughter was so profound that not even the most terrible pogrom could prevent him from laughing at both himself and the world—“Let us talk of something nicer. How is the cholera in Odessa?”<sup>44</sup> Equally embraced by ordinary readers and by the wonder-working zaddiks, he has been characterized as the greatest of all Jewish absurdists who freely blends the bizarre and the grotesque with humor as warm-hearted as it is sharp, misusing the holy scriptures while making his main characters conduct one folly after the other.

Several of Sholem Aleichem’s stories are semi-autobiographical and refer indirectly to both his father and his father-in-law, of whom the former was a wealthy expert in diamonds, a splendid chess player, and a member of a Hasidic dynasty in Chernobyl who, according to Schulman, detested worldly cultivation and snorted at physics and locomotives, a man who, however, found himself on the verge of ruin forced to make his living as the keeper of a shabby inn in the small town of Perejaslev in the heart of Ukraine, where his son hung on the words, the stories, and the legends told by the visiting fiddlers. His father-in-law was tremendously wealthy as well but died young, whereupon his son-in-law immediately squandered the enormous legacy

speculating on the stock exchanges in Kiev and Odessa and had a rough time making his living while writing his best works, a handful of novels, hundreds of short stories, and numerous one-act plays for the Yiddish theater, most of them circulating around the two characters Menachem Mendl and Tevye. The former, “der Luftmensch,” is constantly trying to reach the goals of his dreams and therefore changes his profession as often as people change their shirts, from being a stockbroker and speculator on the exchange to a matrimonial agent and a dealer in cows; the latter is the good-natured milkman who knows how to become reconciled to one’s destiny. Menachem Mendl is “an idler, a daydreamer, a muddler—a wretch,” while Tevye is described as “a wrangler, a man to whom you can throw a verse of God or a parable from Midrash, a man with whom you may philosophize on high matters.” Tevye is the little Jew constantly doing everything possible to survive, an Orthodox believer adamantly keeping to all the prescriptions and instructions who constantly disrupts a discussion on religious matters with misquotations from the scriptures. Menachem Mendl is the dreamer constantly describing one impossible business after another, a man constantly waiting for the “deliverance,” which of course never comes, a wretched fantast, a Jewish Don Quixote whose Sancho Panza is not only Tevye but also his wife Mrs. Scheyne-Scheyndel, as earthbound and practical as her husband is heaven-storming and mad.

Sholem Aleichem started the yearbook *di jiddische folksbibliotek* in 1888, which became extremely important in regard to Jewish self-consciousness and national identity; the first book published in the series was his own novel *stempenju* telling of a Don Juan who loves both women and playing violin but who nevertheless is caught in marriage by the “black-haired and green-eyed” girl Frejdel, though *Stempenju* explicitly longs for the “blond and blue-eyed” Rachel. Tevye, the milkman constantly struggling against poverty and the powerful but who nevertheless has the strength to laugh at his own tragedy, begins his ten-year-long triumphal march through the Jewish people’s library in 1895. Tevye is a poor coachman touring round the country who, together with his wife and children, dies of starvation at least three times a day but who nevertheless dreams of the big happiness coming to him and his family, in the same way as his counterpart Menachem Mendl in the novel with the same title (1892–1905) longs for life-saving but constantly unattainable wealth, always dreaming of “big business,” which of course is nothing else than a pale reflection of the great



eschatological hope. This is the great utopian principle behind Jewish life in the small Eastern European towns which also makes Motl in the unfinished novel *motl pejssi dem chassans* (1907–1915) try his fortune in the “Promised Land” of America. Thus, nothing for “common sense.”

Sholem Rabinowitz spent his childhood in the small town of Voronov in the Poltava region just outside Kiev, which Sholem Aleichem gave the name of Kasrilevka after *kasriel*, the “happy pauper,” which also became the collective name of all the mainly Jewish small towns in Russia, Byelorussia, and Ukraine. The inhabitants of Kasrilevka are suspicious and don’t believe in whatever. It is certainly true that they have heard of cities with houses built in stone, houses with several floors, and cities with paved streets, electricity, and other modern inventions, but something else entirely is the talk of such things as locomotives and carriages on railways, something too remote for credulous peasants, priests in black caftans, and peddling merchants. One day something unexpected happens. One of the merchants is given the opportunity to go to Moscow, and returning home he tells the unbearably curious unbelievers at the inn by the small square that he has traveled by train for almost one hour, really. He himself hardly believed his own eyes: apparently there were no horses despite the fact that the carriage was both big and obviously heavy too, neither in front nor behind the train nor inside the carriages. Obviously and undoubtedly he has experienced a miracle, furthermore a true one. He swears by everything holy for a Jew that it is true and correct, everything he has told. What is one to believe? On the one hand, why would a good friend, an honest and respected businessman and father of a family risk his immortal soul telling of things that do not exist? On the other hand, why be taken in by the traveler’s fables and stories? No, there is only one solution of the dilemma. The group decides to believe in every word spoken by the businessman, but refuses to believe in the train.

Two times a year it is meritorious and very much honorable to get drunk in Kasrilevka, namely on Purim and at Simchas Torah, a day celebrating the memory of the Law when the entire town flares up and the youth, the revelers, and the braggarts dance in the streets, forcing themselves into the houses where people must offer them cookies and wine or cookies and cognac or cookies and beer, otherwise. . . . The excesses come to their climax inside the synagogue, when the Torah scrolls are carried in procession; people are kissing the holy objects and the women, shouting

and clamoring, are forcing their way into the men's section. Two distinguished businessmen are arguing on the street corner, one shouting to the other: "You scoundrel, you rascal, thief, swindler, cheater, I am exactly as honest as you!" At the same time a Talmud student runs out in the street crying blue murder: "Help! Help! I have a wonderful answer. Since God will only give me the question!" Some carpenters, merchants, and tailors are sitting at the inn listening to an animated story of how the innkeeper himself and his wife came upon a pack of wolves the previous winter during a sleigh ride to the neighboring village. Suddenly, can you imagine, when riding in the wood they heard the wolves. And what a howling! Hundreds of wolves, thousands of them! The innkeeper whipped on the horses as hard as he could, the car came closer and closer to the river, and at the banks they could already see the whites of the eyes of the wolves. In the middle of the river, just at the moment they thought they would be safe, imagine, just at that moment the ice gave way and the sleigh began to sink to the bottom. "Folks, what do you think God did?" "Please, tell us. What did He do?" someone asks. "Glory to God! God is great! A miracle happened. The story is a fabrication altogether."

The Jewish song tradition as well must have attracted a future dadaist.<sup>45</sup> For instance, the Hasidic rhymed lampoon kept the traditional melodies while the text was an artful joking at everything and everybody in terms of a heretical undercurrent loving to scoff at the righteous. Remarkable also is the fact that one of the most prominent representatives of the heretical song came to live in Romania toward the end of the nineteenth century, when Wolf Ehrenkrantz was forced to flee from Galicia after having escaped from a marriage of convenience. He walked aimlessly about in Romania for more than twenty-five years from crowded inn to smoky coffeehouse singing, for instance, his mocking "Kum aher du filosof" about a rabbi inviting a freethinker to his table only to scoff at the "philosopher" for his inclination toward steamships and air balloons while boasting that he himself, indeed, could walk on water and quickly without any problems get up in heaven to eat the third dinner of the Sabbath. The Romanian liturgy was also more unbridled than, for instance, the German and Hungarian ones, and here the singers, the *chasanim*, played a decisive role, often more important than that of the rabbi, through their vivid songs and burning recitations, "mad" and ecstatic and strongly recalling both the Dada soirées in Zurich and Tristan

Tzara's conscious emphasis on the oral sound values of the words instead of their "rational" meaning. The similarities are too obvious to be only a coincidence, especially in regard to Tzara's use of endless repetitions of mutually unrelated sentences and words as a way of blocking the act of communication in favor of showing how human existence is repeated forever. The semantic order and the rational flow of thoughts are sabotaged while simultaneity grasps the instantaneous moment in its totality, the ever-flowing moment transcending space and time. At the same time they recall the "dudele" songs common in Hasidism in which the exclamation "you!" is repeated and repeated up to the moment when the ecstatic enthusiasm silences the particular word in favor of the rhythmically continuing "nonsense":

*Where can I find You,  
and where can't I find You?  
You You You You You . . .  
For anywhere I go—You  
anywhere I stand—You  
only You, only You, You  
always You, always You,  
You You You You You!<sup>46</sup>*

A contemporary witness, the historian and scholar Fritz Mordechai Kaufmann, reported in 1919 that the eastern Jewish communities were full of songs and playing; everybody played and danced all the time, from cradle to grave.<sup>47</sup> All events were accompanied by both ecstatic and more quiet dances, songs, and playing, from the melancholic lullaby through the inflammatory wedding dance. The dominating key is major, often interrupted by inserted minor notes. Compared to western folksongs the timbre is stiff, inelastic, one-colored, and characterized by a seeming monotony displaying a non-European emotional register. People don't try to sing "purely"; the flow of the melody is determined by the character of the recitation following the ancient liturgical music, the song often accompanied by the same shivering and shaking gestures accompanying the prayer. True choir singing is also almost always excluded; the congregation accompanies the reciter by shouting and crying, thus expressing its feeling of joy and happiness without regular words.



FIGURE 12.2

"Sisu vesimhu" (Hasidic dance).

Muzeul de Istorie a Evreilor din

România "sef rabin dr. Moses

Rosen," Bucharest.

When Inge Kümmerle, speaking of Tristan Tzara's dramatic texts *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine* of 1916 and *La deuxième aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine* of 1920, says that Tzara consciously deconstructs classical Western theater (though the formal minimum demands on what might be defined as theater are fulfilled, since the figure is in fact standing on the stage saying his "lines"), she sees the historical prototype in the farce, according to her the most original, most spontaneous, and most popular example of a theatrical situation, the most plausible reflection of "illogical" and "absurd" life full of paradoxes and contradictions. Kümmerle points also to the scandalous performance of Kokoschka's *Sphinx und Strohmann* and Tzara's emphasis on the active participation of the audience, with the hall of Galerie Dada transformed into a huge stage crowded by masks and other grotesqueries, and refers to the preclassical Dionysian cult as one of the sources of inspiration in regard to Tzara's dramatic art as a whole.<sup>48</sup>

Hardly any of the future dadaists in Moinești, Botoșani, or Bucharest, however, could possibly have avoided another prototype: the more or less loosely composed theater groups touring Eastern and Central Europe that constituted the core of the Jewish theater of the absurd, on the basis of the concept formulated by Avram Goldfaden in Iași in Moldavia.<sup>49</sup> Jewish dramatic art derives its origin directly from the Purim play immediately connected with the Purim festival celebrated at the end of February or the beginning of March in memory of the victory of the Jews over their Persian enemies as told in the book of Esther, a folk festival strongly recalling the Christian *colinde* festivals by the fact that the children and sometimes also adults are dressed up in fancy costumes and perform an often exhilarated, ironic, and satirical version of the book of Esther, and also by the fact that the participants then go in procession from house to house to receive a little gift or a small donation to charity. To show that things are not what they seem and that God works in mysterious ways, the fancy costumes are as fancy as possible, the more "absurd" the better, while the plays are parodies of established authority. The plays, deriving from the sixteenth century, were performed in Yiddish by the following century and are generally defined as laymen's plays thanks to their simple structure, their popular language, and their coarsely burlesque traits. When Avram Goldfaden along with a group of amateurs started the first Yiddish theater in Iași, he was not only inspired by the *Purim Shpiel* or by the traveling actors, singers, and fiddlers touring in southern Russia and in



FIGURE 12.3

Avram Goldfaden. Muzeul de Istorie

a Evreilor din România "sef rabin dr.

Moses Rosen, " Bucharest.

Romania during the second half of the nineteenth century, entertaining the audience with popular street ballads and grotesque farces; he was also influenced by his teacher and mentor Abraham Ber Gottlober, one of the sworn enemies of Hasidism, who called Yiddish “a shameful dialect” and the Hasidic Jews “Gypsies, an uncultivated people.”<sup>50</sup> One of his best-known anti-Hasidic texts is *der dektukh* (1876), a comedy mercilessly satirizing the superstitions of Orthodox Hasidism according to a pattern easily putting good against evil, where the former is represented by the “simple people” full of reason and good qualities while the evil is personified by wild, fanatic rabbis and zaddiks, all of them either swindlers or coarse scoundrels without any kind of scruples regarding their efforts to promote their own interests.

Goldfaden was variously teacher, writer, cashier, medical student, composer, and a traveling singer who wrote and presented several immoderately popular plays. His engagement with theater started with himself acting the leading part in Ettinger’s *sserkele* in 1862, which the headmaster of the rabbinical school in Zhitomir in Ukraine, Hayyim Seelig Slonimsky, decided to set up in the form of a Purim play. Since there were no women available, Goldfaden, then only twenty, had to dress up in women’s clothes to be able to play the title role—and his fate was sealed, the theater became his life. If many of Goldfaden’s own texts were performed by the itinerant groups who set up comical sketches and sang wherever they could, in town squares and at inns, Goldfaden’s institutional theater derived its origin from the style characterizing those groups, the best known of which in the mid-nineteenth century was that of the Singer brothers. The latter had already presented several of Goldfaden’s songs when its leader Israel Grodner settled down in Iași and met with Goldfaden in person, then in 1876 placed himself under Goldfaden’s command. The first play performed by the new theater in October 1876 in Simon Mark’s cellar in Iași was a comical one-act play, which was quickly followed by one play after another. A characteristic trait of these is that Goldfaden and his followers shift freely between time and style layers, sometimes using religious melodies from the synagogue, sometimes modern street ballads, sometimes abruptly tossing out parodic jokes, sometimes rolling solemn phrases telling of the elevation of the chosen people. Many of the songs and plays performed on the stage in Bucharest, Iași, or Czernowitz soon became as popular as the old folksongs.

Although Goldfaden also wrote and performed numerous poems and songs, most of them published posthumously in the collection *pintele jid* in 1909, a sort of commedia dell'arte-inspired improvisations, ballads, and parodies poking fun at, for instance, the Jewish schizophrenia, he became known as the Jewish dramatist par excellence. His tremendously popular comedies *schmendrik* in 1877, *schulamit* in 1883, and *barkochba* in 1887 were characterized by their entertaining, comical trivialization of historical subjects and biblical stories, strange long plays with obvious elements from both the Jewish tradition itself and Western European classical poetry, from Shakespeare, Schiller, and Offenbach, the great classical opera and French vaudeville. Dressed up in gaudy costumes, touring actors or local amateurs played these heroically comical pieces telling of Jewish life and history. The mighty hero and liberator Bar-Kochba bids farewell to his beloved in a half-moving, half-comical aria, a Persian army of three horrifying men stamps onto the stage marching to Jerusalem, oppressed Jews are sitting at the table eating the paschal lamb and are accused of ritual murder, while the rag-and-bone men, the furriers, the carpenters, the watchmakers, boys and girls, young and old stare excitedly at the stage, shudder, rejoice, laugh without restraint when the jokes are raining over them as they weep and sob when the hero dies or is forced to leave his beloved. Goldfaden's ballads and music hall songs are just as unrestrainedly comical, most of them linked to medieval buffoonery or farce as well as to ancient troubadour songs and street ballads performed by the extremely popular contemporary touring company founded by Wolf Ehrenkrantz and Berl Margolius in Brody. Everything is blended and mixed, as at the dadaist soirées in Zurich, absurd figures and high-chested matrons, princes and princesses, thieves and crooks, heroes and victims—and many of the actors have “cubist” masks or walk on stilts. There are no “good” hierarchies, high is blended with low, sacred with worldly, jokes with serious matters in the same way as Tzara says of Dada: everything is okay, every means is allowed, art is a matter of life and death, we refuse to believe in rational solutions and logical deductions.

Despite the fact that Goldfaden himself, forced to move to Odessa in connection with the Russo-Turkish war, was prevented from working by an imperial ukase in 1888 and had to emigrate to the United States, his plays were performed over and over again in both Iași and Bucharest, in Vilnius, Lemberg, Krakow, Warsaw, Berlin, Leipzig, and Amsterdam. He also acquired numerous followers and imitators, among



FIGURE 12.4

The actor J. Goldenberg as Bar-Kochba at the turn of the century. Muzeul de Istorie a Evreilor din România "sef rabin dr. Moses Rosen," Bucharest.



J Goldenberg ca. Bar Kochba  
Marie Nida  
S. COCSANI

them Jakob Gordin, who was well informed on classical world literature and who translated many of the motifs of Western European theatrical literature into Jewish ghetto milieus, motifs from, for instance, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Goethe's *Faust* in his play *Gott, mensch und teufel*, at the same time as he transferred the realism and psychology of modern European dramatic art to the Jewish stage, thus describing the merciless life of the poor Jews and their spiritual and worldly conflicts in, for instance, the play *die schschite*, in which a woman unhappy in love, tormented by pain, cuts her throat with a butcher's knife. The Western references didn't however silence the "dadaist" monotonous voices or the loud, shouting emotional outbursts when the plays were performed in the squares of the small Eastern European country towns or out in the villages.

The writer and journalist Joseph Roth, born in Grody, remembered seeing for the first time at the turn of the century the posters for a Jewish theater coming from Vilnius, and how these clearly differed from ordinary posters by their "resolute" simplicity, their "provisional brutality," and their "primitive rawness" without any artistic or technical routine. Apparently these were printed on a hand press, glued awry on a wall instead of on the official notice board, and written in a language often heard at the small coffeehouses in the Jewish quarters which seemed to consist only of sounds and clangs and which appeared to be Yiddish written in Latin letters; it was "grotesque German," at the same time raw, coarse, and gently loving. If you spelled this peculiar language slowly and thoughtfully, it sounded only laughable, but if you spoke it fast and unthoughtfully, it became tender, delicate, and extremely fragile in the same way as the language spoken by the actors on the stage later that evening. Roth remembered that a music hall play from the early days of the Jewish theater was performed, a "tragedy with song and dance," according to Roth a subtitle that very well characterized Jewish everyday life. According to Roth, the play was both kitschy, maudlin, miserable, and true, its subject coarse, the plot haphazard, and the characters superficial; it was played only on account of the songs—folksongs and music hall songs, Oriental and Slavic melodies performed by uncultivated, raw voices, songs freely and unrestrainedly copying both their prototypes and contemporary hits.<sup>51</sup>

In the story of the connections between the Jewish theater and the avant-garde aesthetics that began to develop around the turn of the century, the culmination of

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**THEATRU ISRAELIT**  
 Sub conducerea renumitului autor  
**A. GOLDFADEN**  
 Regisor **M. SEGALIESCU**



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FIGURE 12.5

Advertisement for the theater  
 Gradina Lieblich's production  
 of Avram Goldfaden's play *A-X  
 Porunca*, Bucharest, 1892.

the Jewish theater in Moscow after the revolution was also a kind of culmination of the Eastern European avant-garde as a whole.<sup>52</sup> At the same time it more or less openly reveals an essential source of impulses for a great deal of the activities at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich as well, in combination with, for instance, Hugo Ball's and Emmy Hennings's engagement in the European cabaret tradition and the German expressionist theater. For instance, it seems noteworthy that both Hugo Ball and Alexander Granovsky, the manager of the Jewish State Theater (GOSET) in Moscow, had been engaged at Max Reinhardt's Kammerspiele in Munich, Ball as director, Granovsky as Reinhardt's personal apprentice.

In connection with the revolution, both the Kamerny theater in Moscow, which played in Yiddish and for which Granovsky was responsible, and the Habimah theater, which played in Hebrew, became places of intense cross-fertilizing interaction among the various avant-garde groups in the new capital in both theater, dance, music, visual arts, and literature. At the beginning the Yiddish theater was a small ethnic theater performing more or less insignificant one-act plays and vaudeville pieces, but it very soon captured a remarkable position within the hectic, revolutionary Russian avant-garde thanks to Granovsky's taking over the management in company with Solomon Michoels and in collaboration with, for instance, Marc Chagall, Nathan Altman, and Eliezer Lissitzky. The theater was consciously linked up with both Jewish folklore and the Jewish theater tradition from both the Purim plays to Goldfaden and Gordin, within which, for instance, the *badchan*, the professional jester whose task was to enliven the wedding celebrations among Eastern European Jews with songs, jokes, and riddles, played the role of the marionette, at the same time as the theater was explicitly built on the popular burlesque and the Western European cabaret tradition. The *badchan* must have been an essential source of immediate inspiration for the Romanian dadaists as well; the jester worked together with the band of musicians, the klezmer, and sometimes his words were very cutting, making fun of all those present and not even sparing the embarrassed newlyweds. Joseph Roth, who himself visited the theater in Moscow in 1926, wrote that he was attracted especially by the glaring colors, the deafening noise, and the deranged gestures. According to him, the theater was not only a preposterously intensified world, it was a totally other world, an "extraterrestrial" world, in the same way as the actors were no longer real members of the cast but rather "enchanted exponents of a curse" speaking with voices never heard anywhere else and singing with a desperate ardor, their wild



**FIGURE 12.6**

The Vilnius Jewish theater in  
Bucharest, c. 1910. Muzeul de  
Istorie a Evreilor din România  
"sef rabin dr. Moses Rosen,"  
Bucharest.



FIGURE 12.7

Mask for the Jewish theater in  
Bucharest. Muzeul de Istorie a  
Evreilor din România "sef rabin dr.  
Moses Rosen," Bucharest.

dances suggesting both intoxicated bacchants and mad Hasidim. According to Roth, one needed a whole evening to get used to the deafening noise and the tension of the play, impossible to intensify any more or everything would explode in ecstasy and total chaos. An Oriental Jew was presented on the stage, a Jew with whom you met in hotter, older zones, an impassioned Dionysian Jew intoxicated by both joy and sorrow.<sup>53</sup>

When Tristan Tzara declares that he writes his 1918 Dada manifesto to show that it is possible to perform contrary actions at the same time, explaining that he is against all systems while declaring that the most acceptable system is to have none, this recalls not only the classical liar's paradox but also several of the paradoxically equivocal jokes that Sigmund Freud retells in his *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, published in 1905, for instance the famous joke about the two Jews meeting in a railway carriage in a station somewhere in Galicia:

*“Where are you going?” the one asks the other. “To Cracow,” is the answer. “Look, what a liar you are,” the one flares up. “When saying you are going to Cracow, you want me to believe that you are going to Lemberg. However, now I know that you in fact are going to Cracow. So, why lie to me?”*<sup>54</sup>

According to Freud, this priceless story, giving the impression of an overdone subtlety, follows the technics of the absurd, here combined with oppositions and contradictions. It is no coincidence either that the majority of Freud's examples derive from the Jewish joke tradition, whose nursery was the Eastern European Jewish culture from which Freud himself originated and to which he himself referred when he wished to give drastic concreteness to his own contributions during the hours of analysis: Sigmund Schlomo Freud's father Jakob Freud came originally from Tysmenitz in Galicia, a small town characterized by both Jewish Orthodoxy, Hasidism, and Enlightenment ideas, and he himself was born in Pířbor in Czech Moravia, a town with a relatively large Jewish minority.

When Tristan Tzara and the other dadaists at the Meierei claim that Dada means nothing whatever, that Dada in itself is meaningless, we are also reminded of those jokes which, according to Freud, openly expose something absurd, an obvious

meaninglessness, a stupidity, within the framework of which the meaninglessness as such is the joke in itself, and of which Freud finds surprisingly many examples in the Jewish joke tradition. One of these “dadaist” examples tells of Itzig, placed in the artillery, an intelligent but clumsy youth uninterested in being a soldier. One of his superiors, favorably disposed toward him, takes him aside and says to him: “Itzig, you are no good for us. I will give you a piece of advice: buy a cannon and set up in business yourself.”<sup>55</sup> According to Freud, the technique of this and similar jokes is to expose something silly, meaningless, or absurd, which shows and describes something else equally stupid and meaningless—which recalls the common definition of Dada as a protest against the absurdity and the madness of the ongoing war with the help of absurdity and madness.

The Jewish joke, permeated by black humor and absurdism, emerged and flourished in the specifically Eastern European Jewish culture, partly as a safety valve in relation to the miserable social circumstances, partly more or less directly connected with Hasidism and the religious tensions revealed by this in the Jewish communities.<sup>56</sup> According to Jan Meyerowitz, some typical jokes may have originated in those invectives that different ecstatic fanatics, dissolute mystics, and Orthodox Talmudists threw at each other during the religious strife in Poland and Ukraine at the beginning of the eighteenth century,<sup>57</sup> though the Jewish joke generally is a result of or parallel to the European joke in general, a product of epigrammatic poetry of the eighteenth century, French witticism, and romantic irony. At the same time, anti-Semitic humor may have contributed, as well as those self-ironic jokes that caricatured the caricatures. The first targets of the ironic jokes were the wonder-working zaddiks and the Talmudists true to the letter, whose methods of interpretation were subjected to sneers and derision. Another standard figure was the *Jeschiwe-Bocher*, the poor Talmud student highly esteemed by the Jewish bourgeoisie because of his immense learning and who therefore was invited to one extravagant dinner after the other. The Jewish coachman, merchant, craftsman, innkeeper, and poor sponger were also parodied, as well as numerous persons outside the Jewish communities, the landlord, the Christian peasant, the rude policeman, the brutal officer, and, of course, the Christian priest.

According to Meyerowitz, the Jewish joke is the fruit of the legalism of Jewish culture, the way of thinking always circulating around the law, the commandments,



and the prescriptions, the inflexible law regulating everything from the first bath through the burial, the law interpreted in the Talmud and possible to untie only by parody and irony.<sup>58</sup> But the Talmud is no simple collection of rules and regulations or a code of laws once and for all codified, but already by the time of its composition the very opposite of this: to the eyes of Western rationality, an inconsequent and seemingly haphazard collection of everything between heaven and earth, a mischievous, laconic, ironic, and sometimes indescribably dry collection giving space for an unlimited multiplicity of different interpretations. At the same time the book—or rather the books—is characterized by an extreme sensitivity to both reality and the impossible at the same time, which means that contradictions are woven into the texture of revelation. Studying the Talmud, one is not only authorized to ask questions and to be critical; this is the very purpose of the studies: the calling into question is itself immanently holy. Out of the Talmud the attitude emerged that came to determine the Jewish way of thinking, characterized by an endless search for opposites and paradoxical contradictions, the effort of seeing things “on the other hand.”<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, the Talmud and Talmudic thinking are the key to the Jewish joke: from the Talmud the joke fetches its form and shape, and it is no expression of modern lack of respect to find deeply humorous parts in the holy scripture. The faith interpreted according to the Talmud turns resolutely against every form of puritanism and asceticism; on the contrary it has a deep understanding of the natural necessities of human life. For instance, it is forbidden to crack nuts or to remove a splinter from one’s finger during the Sabbath, but it is permitted to crack the nuts with the help of a big hammer and to remove the splinter with the help of a long knitting needle simply because a work of this kind is so extraordinarily difficult and unusual that it makes it impossible to break the law without consciously thinking of one’s horrible crime. For the most part the Jewish joke is a play with the extraordinary and unusual but fully thinkable, which corresponds with how improbably wild but theoretically fully thinkable situations are described in the Talmud to demonstrate the extreme consequences or nonconsequences of different legal problems. In the Talmud, absurdly unthinkable situations are often imagined to investigate how the law may be applied to extremely improbable cases, which also suggests the fantasy at work in popular fairy tales and fantastic stories; thus, the Talmud itself may be defined as an anthology of paradoxes all aiming at constant calling into question and reconsidering

conventions and established notions and conceptions in the search for the underlying causes. The common joke shaped as a small riddle, where the enigma gets its solution through a question, is also inspired by the Talmudic style of dialogue often parodying scientific rationality by a form of anti-scholastics, which associates also with Tristan Tzara's comments on dialectics as an amusing machine that guides us to the opinions we had in the first place and objectivity as the science of finding everything in order. When Tzara says that there is no final truth and that Dada respects "all individuals in their folly of the moment" and when he declares that Dada is "an interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, and inconsistencies: LIFE,"<sup>60</sup> he seems at the same time to voice the Talmudic understanding that reality is often inconsequent, illogical, and absurd and that systematic abstractions are not an indication of the true value of logic or systematics a priori;<sup>61</sup> that truth, as far as it exists, is an endless multiplicity, as manifold as the multiplicity of people, unique in themselves but with access to a common language and a shared tradition. This is the case in regard to Tzara's dramatic texts as well, within the framework of which he strongly and resolutely rejects classical Western theater, which, according to him, always falsely stylizes the true complexity of life, its contradictions, its grotesque and paradoxical elements.<sup>62</sup>

—Little Pjotr, *what would you do if you were totally alone in the whole world?*

—*I would take the train to my aunt in Leipzig.*<sup>63</sup>

Many of the Jewish jokes are "dadaist" in regard also to the language in which they are told or written, since they are often based on "double Dutch" or gibberish and its possibilities of puns, linguistic jests, and semantic ambiguities. "Double Dutch" was a mixed language traversed by Hebrew words and phrases and spread by both German vagabonds and Jewish book-travelers and peddlers who spent the evenings at the inns telling one fantastic joke after the other, jokes parodying everything and everybody without distinction or respect.<sup>64</sup> But even if the language was "impure" and "intertextually" blended and the ironic attacks as merciless as the parody was full of delight and pleasure, these "existentialists of the country road" never went further

than always keeping their respect for the word in itself, the word *an sich*, both the written word with its letters and the spoken word with its sound values.

Although Hugo Ball, as far as is known, never showed any positive attitude toward the Jewish tradition and might even be anti-Semitic in his *Zur Kritik der deutschen Intelligenz*,<sup>65</sup> published in 1919, he may be said to interpret the attitude of the Romanian dadaists born inside this tradition when, inspired by and with direct reference to Marinetti, he declared in his diary in June 1916 that the dadaists at the Meierei had

*driven the plasticity of the word to the point where it can scarcely be equaled. We achieved this at the expense of the rational, logically constructed sentence, and also by abandoning documentary work (which is possible only by means of a time-consuming grouping of sentences in logically ordered syntax)."*<sup>66</sup>

According to Ball, the dadaists went even one step further than the circle around Marinetti, who, according to him, had taken the word out of the sentence frame that had been thoughtlessly and automatically assigned to it and who had nourished "the emaciated big-city vocables with light and air" and given the words back their "warmth, emotion, and their original untroubled freedom." The dadaists, on the other hand, tried to give the isolated vocables "the fullness of an oath, the glow of a star"; curiously enough, the magically inspired vocables conceived and gave birth to a new sentence that was not limited and confined by any conventional meaning. Less than a week later he recited his *Lautgedichte* dressed in Marcel Janco's "bishop's costume" in "a church style like a recitative" recalling the "ancient cadence of priestly lamentation," only to declare the day after that in these "phonetic poems" he totally renounced the language that journalism has abused and corrupted and that from now on he must return to "the innermost alchemy of the word."<sup>67</sup>

"The word and the image are one. Painter and poet belong together," Ball says in his diary,<sup>68</sup> and he could have referred for instance, had he wished, to Tristan Tzara's, Marcel Janco's, and Richard Huelsenbeck's common simultaneous poem "L'amiral cherche une maison à louer," Marinetti's "Dune-Parole in liberté," or Francesco Cangiullo's poem "Addioooo," all three of which had been published in *Cabaret Voltaire* only a few weeks earlier, three poems spreading the letters all over the page as if the page itself was a cubist or futurist painting.<sup>69</sup> Hardly surprisingly, the

authors refer, in a note to the first poem, to Picasso, Braque, Picabia, Duchamp-Villon, Delaunay, Blaise Cendrars, Jules Romain, Henri Barzun, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Stéphane Mallarmé.<sup>70</sup> Of these Mallarmé had gone through a poetic crisis around 1867, after which he shifted emphasis farther and farther away from the signified toward the signifier, the material vessel of the communicated content, away from mediated reality toward the mediating instance itself, toward language and its visual appearance as such in a way that may be described as a shifting from referential qualities toward writing as a material medium, its syntactic and typographic elements.<sup>71</sup> The most radical example and at the same time one of the prototypes of both the typographical excesses of the Italian futurists some ten years later and the dadaist linguistic experiments some twenty years later is the famous poem “Un coup de dés” in 1897 about the throw of the dice never able to cancel chance. The poem is shaped as a typographic montage of individual words and combinations of words on more than twenty pages where the broken syntax, the absence of punctuation, and the uneven spreading of the words on the pages make a “natural” referential reading impossible. The page of the book itself is established as a space of composition in a way that recalls how the contemporary neoimpressionists built up their flatness composed of color spots and stains, a flatness leading straight to cubism through Cézanne. According to Walter Benjamin, Mallarmé’s poem must be seen in the sharp light of modern times and the contemporary acceleration of technology, economy, advertising, and public and urban life: writing, which had been granted a place of refuge in the printed book, is now mercilessly dragged into the streets.<sup>72</sup> From being upright inscription it is first transformed into handwriting only to go to bed in the printed book and then to rise once again at the turn of the century. Already the newspaper is read more horizontally than vertically and film and advertising force writing into the dictatorial vertical, Benjamin says, and he could just as well have referred to contemporary art and its “textual” configurations on the canvas, as well as to radically transcendent expressions of fascination with the material and visual forms of language.

When Benjamin, an assimilated Jew to the same extent as Tzara and the Janco brothers, sees Mallarmé’s poem in the light of modernity and modern urban life, he might have referred to Tzara and his typographically experimental poetry as well,<sup>73</sup> a poetry which by virtue not only of its incomprehensibility but also of its visuality

constantly threatens to dissolve its own definition as poetry. According to Tzara, who freely borrows phrases and fragments from daily newspapers, advertising texts, and railway timetables, neither poetry itself nor oral speech must be considered as isolated from the cultural surroundings: the linguistic signs, both as visual elements and as elements in the spoken language, take part in the modern circulation of goods and signs. Tzara's typographically radical poems originate first from his interest in "poésie nègre" just after his arrival in Zurich and the meeting with the company at the Meierei, when he "translated" several poems from different African languages. Caring neither for the anthropological aspects nor the semantic meaning or value of the words, he emphasized instead their sound values and their rhythmical patterns by looking into the linguistic materiality itself. From there he turned to the conventional typography of the daily newspapers and the advertising pillars familiar to everybody, while he kept the emphasis on the sound values of the words, close to spoken language.

If the American literary scholar Arthur Cohen is right, writing derives from oral speech, whose living impulses and spontaneity are lost in writing, invented out of an original fear that speech would be silenced. According to Cohen, this original spontaneity is preserved in calligraphic writing, whose visuality gets the same status as the spoken word thanks to the fact that the visual appearance is recognized as fast and as immediately as the spoken word.<sup>74</sup> Typographically experimental poetry of the turn of the century refers to the advertising language of the late nineteenth century, whose painted signs shaped as immediate visual exclamation marks (for instance) imitated the quickness and the sound values of spoken language and thereby reintroduced a kind of originality aimed at catching the attention as fast and as effectively as possible, something the dadaists consciously used and developed.

If nineteenth-century advertising language was one of the sources of inspiration thanks to its combination of the visuality of writing and the sound values of the spoken word, there is another domain in which the very same combination is one of the cornerstones, one that at least the Romanians at Cabaret Voltaire must have known very well and to which they could have referred, had they wished, namely the Jewish cultural and religious tradition and its emphasis not only on writing, the written word and alphabetic sign as visual graphic elements, but also the holy originality of the spoken word. According to the *Zohar*, for instance, one can have a mystical



FIGURE 12.8

Page from a Jewish prayer book,

17th century (?).

visual experience of God by pondering on the written characters of the Scriptures; in early Jewish mysticism one can obtain divine ecstasy by combining letters and visualizing colors in the same way as a Hasid may perceive the divine mysteries with the help of rhythmic beating, monotonous movements of the body, and repeated recitations of letters and divine names, which are broken down in new structures by different combinations of letters and linguistic innovations. In Hasidism one of the most common techniques for “cleaving to God” was to cleave to the characters, something that Baal Shem Tov describes as putting all the strength into uttering, continuing from letter to letter until the bodily nature of the person is forgotten.

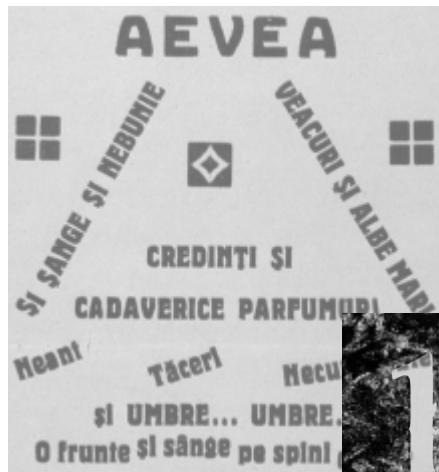
The Hebraic characters are not only symbols but, in a great deal of Jewish mysticism, also a kind of divine bricks. For instance, *Sefer Yetzirah*, an early mystical work of the Maaseh Bereshit tradition, tells of the formation of the cosmos by God through the ten Sefirot and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet which were engraved on the primordial ether. These letters are classified in different groups and their structure is reflected in the three dimensions of space, time, and the human soul. We are also told that the Tabernacle was formed by means of such letter combinations. In Hasidism it was also common to follow and reflect upon the *gematria*, the homiletic rule that associates words or phrases with other words or phrases whose letters add up to the same numerical value; each letter of the alphabet stands for a unique number, and large numbers are made up of combinations of letters. The biblical text may be interpreted by means of this rule to reveal information about people, places, and dates by its choice of words. One could also use *notaricon*, the analysis of the letters of a word as an abbreviation of a whole sentence, or *temura*, an exchange of letters following certain rules. In Hasidic mysticism of prayers the numerical values of the number of words of the prayer, the particular words, and the sentences were also put in connection not only with biblical verses with the same numerical value but also with certain names of God, names of angels, and other formulas. In Isaak Luria, for instance, a similar importance was attached to the numerical value of the words as to the visual, calligraphic appearance of the particular letter.

Remarkable also is the fact that, since written Hebrew—and Aramaic—lacks vowels and punctuation, the reader of Talmudic texts doesn’t know exactly where a sentence or a meaning begins or ends or whether the sentence is affirming, negating, questioning, or exclaiming, which is why oral recitation may compensate for the

lacking punctuation. At the same time the text has been “desubjectified” or “intertextualized” like any dadaist simultaneous poem by the fact that it is almost totally impossible to separate the particular texts from each other by pointing out their specific authors, since the texts are written by hundreds of writers over the centuries and put in no special order. The texts are decentralized and “democratized”—as the American literary scholar Manuel Grossman says that Tristan Tzara’s typographically experimental simultaneous poems undermine the traditional literary hierarchies by the fact that neither the reader nor the author is put at the center any more, while the conventional poetic language collapses in favor of the “thought born in the mouth.” In regard to Hasidic pantheism it is remarkable yet natural when Grossman says that Tzara’s poems conclude a sort of pact with nature: all things in the poem, whether people, plants, animals, or minerals, talk with their own voices, and the words pouring out have to be valued for their own specific resonance and color as equal and nonhierarchically ordered in the montagelike, simultaneous textual fabric.<sup>75</sup> In regard to Tzara’s dramatic texts Inge Kümmerle points to the fact that the motif of the pseudo-dramatic course of events is language itself, since the linguistic process as such—a language that dissolves its own syntax—is the action on the stage.<sup>76</sup> Tzara makes no difference between subject and object, main clause and subordinate clause, and doesn’t usually use prepositions or conjunctions; the language advances as a result of anti-sentences and endlessly repeated concepts without any hierarchical order or structure. The language loses its character as a system and becomes a “democratic” inventory of its own elements, a kind of “alphabet” in the broad sense of the word, which recalls also both Marcel Janco’s “futurist” paintings and Arthur Segal’s semiabstract “patchwork” paintings that reflect and practice his notion of *Gleichwertigkeit*. Only a coincidence?







**Back IN**

**BUCHAREST**

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Although Arthur Segal took part in numerous exhibitions in Bucharest and spent his summers in Romania year after year, while Tristan Tzara paid a short visit to Bucharest in September 1923<sup>1</sup> and somewhat regularly corresponded with his parents there during the 1920s and the 1930s, Marcel Iancu and his brothers Iuliu and George Iancu were the only ones of the Romanians at the Meierei who returned to Bucharest to actively participate in and shape the avant-garde there after the war.

Indeed, Marcel Iancu did not rest on his laurels when he returned to Bucharest. Although he had worked only on the planning of the small department store of Chevalier-Westrelin in Hinges during his stay in Béthune, his father Hermann Iancu commissioned him, apparently immediately after his arrival, to plan and build seven small two-story houses along the alley he had opened on one side of his own big garden of more than 10,000 square meters on 29 Strada Trinității. The couple Marcel and Lily Iancu moved into one of these architectonically quite traditional houses as soon as the project was realized, officially by the architect I. Rosenthal since Marcel Iancu had no certification.<sup>2</sup>

Though uncertified, he made his living mainly as an architect, a living that had to be enough for the family as well, including the couple's first daughter Claude-Simone, who, however, died before her first birthday, and their second child Josine-Cécile, born in 1926 and christened in the Roman Catholic church in Bucharest. The marriage to Lily Ackermann, who had lived by herself in a house planned by her husband in Brașov for quite a time, collapsed four years later, and Marcel Iancu married Clara Goldschlager, called Medi or Maddy, the younger sister of Jacques Costin whom Iancu had met during the time of *Simbolul*. Two years later their daughter Deborah Theodora was born, called Dadi. Indeed, the money had to do for traveling as well, to Switzerland and France, and for the family's visits every summer to Balçic on the Black Sea, a seaside resort extremely popular among Romanian writers, artists, and other intellectuals up to the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

In the same year—1922—as the Iancu brothers returned to Bucharest, Marcel and Iuliu Iancu opened a joint architectural office called Birou de Studii Moderne, located in a building planned by themselves at the corner of Strada Trinității, Strada Caimatei, and Strada Paleologu. A plaque by the entrance facing the street didn't help passersby to determine whether the office was run by one or two persons, announcing that the bureau belonged to "Marcel Iuliu Iancu"; in fact Marcel Iancu provided

the creative ideas while his brother was responsible for the practical arrangements and the negotiations with entrepreneurs and supervised the workers and the carpenters.<sup>3</sup> Up to the late 1930s the office planned and was responsible for more than forty buildings, of which most were “ultramodern” private villas in Bucharest and the biggest was a sanatorium in the Râsnoavei valley near Predeal, one of the first private establishments for lung disease cure in Romania, planned by Iancu in 1934 as a pure constructivist building smoothly adapting to the landscape. Marcel Janco himself has also related that his friend the sculptor Milița Petrașcu collaborated with him on almost every important construction.<sup>4</sup>

The social pressure on Bucharest was enormous in these years. The number of inhabitants increased from 380,000 in 1918 to more than 650,000 twelve years later and to almost one million in 1939, while the area of city planning was doubled to keep in step with a merciless economic growth. Spurred mainly by enormous foreign investments, Bulevardul Tache Ionescu (today Bulevardul Magheru), for instance, was suddenly bordered by one monumental functionalist building after another, of which Horia Creangă’s ARO building, built in 1929–1931, was the flagship along with, for instance, Arghir Culina’s Hotel Ambassador, built in 1938–1939, Marcel Locar’s Palladio, built in 1936, and Rudolf Fraenckel’s Scala, built in 1937. At the same time, big buildings and private houses were being built in almost every part of the city, office buildings, sports halls, libraries, and tenement houses, all of them in the new “modern style.”<sup>5</sup>

Amidst this enormous building activity and the great number of both small and large functionalist buildings that were erected during this time, once and for all transforming Bucharest into a modern and international capital, Marcel Iancu’s contributions may seem modest; but it was Marcel and Iuliu Iancu who introduced the Stil Nou (new style) to Romania after Marcel Iancu took part in the first constructivist congress in Düsseldorf, initiated by Theo van Doesburg in 1922,<sup>6</sup> and then planned Villa Jean Fuchs,<sup>7</sup> the very first constructivist building in Bucharest. This was built four years later on Strada Negustori after Fuchs, a wealthy wine trader who read foreign art magazines, placed one million lei and a building site in a commercial area in the old city at Iancu’s disposal, giving the architect full freedom to realize his modern ideas. The result was a sculptural composition of white cubes, horizontal rows of windows, horizontal stripes of balconies, and a top-floor terrace. The same

functionalist principles would characterize all of Iancu's villas, for instance the Villa Wechsler on Strada Grigore Mora, planned in 1931, the Villa Reich on the same street (1936), the Villa Juster on Strada Silvestru (1931), and the Villa Hassner in Parcul Jianu (1937), as well as the sanatorium in Predeal and other big buildings such as the Bazaltin building on Șoșeăua Jianu in 1935 and the Frida Cohen building on Strada Stelea Spătaru in the same year. The functionalist principle of an obvious and clearly visible correspondence between the different parts of the building, its function, and the needs of the user characterizes all of Iancu's buildings and is especially apparent in the sanatorium, a long, narrow white building clearly signaling its function as a hospital. According to Seiwert,<sup>8</sup> the building reflects perhaps more obviously than any of Iancu's other projects those ideas of the building as a kind of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* formulated already by Karl Moser at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich, ideas that Marcel Janco himself had discussed and further developed in his lectures in 1918.<sup>9</sup> According to Janco, the architect's most important skill is his ability to compose, which is defined as the great ordering force that "we admire in everything in the world." The obvious goal is to achieve a "harmony of forms" as functional as possible, "the absolute point" awakening the feeling of eternity thanks to the organic composition of the particular elements, especially the surfaces, making, for instance, a window with closed shutters as beautiful as a miracle. The same principle that is in force in regard to the interior must be in force in regard to the exterior as well. The building must be planned from inside out with the function as its point of departure, which means also that the particular rooms must follow the principle of clarity so that one may easily recognize the "simple crystal form." Therefore one shouldn't hang any pictures on the walls because this would disturb the tectonic principles and the organic clarity of the building, Janco says, and refers to the principles of composition applied in modern abstract art, especially in cubism, which he celebrates without reservations.

Janco's theoretical reflections upon the architectonic work as a harmonious, organically composed whole, where the interior corresponds to the exterior and reflects the needs of the user with functionality and efficiency, also recall to a surprising extent Arthur Segal's contemporary theory of *Gleichwertigkeit* and may therefore, at least indirectly, refer to common discussions and may also reflect their common cultural origin. Like Segal, Janco had been engaged in both *Das Neue Leben* and *Die*

Radikale Künstler and their efforts to create a new “social” art. Indeed, the fact that he as an architect paid attention to the architect’s role in shaping a democratic society<sup>10</sup> may further be connected with the cultural roots he shared with Segal, namely the Jewish tradition according to which man is responsible for the creation of the world together with God. The strongly utopian and socially aware trait in many of Iancu’s theoretical reflections, for instance in the manifesto-like essay “Utopia Bucureștilor,” published in 1935 in the leaflet *Către o arhitectură a Bucureștilor* of the “modern movement,”<sup>11</sup> in which Iancu explicitly claimed that Bucharest must be rebuilt totally according to the new utopian ideas because “the new city must be utopian” to cope with the social crisis, connects with current ideas within international modernism (energetically discussed in Bucharest as well) but seems also to reflect the fundamental Talmudic and cabalistic concept of *tikkun*, which simply means “to rectify the world” and thereby complete the creation according to an ethical imperative to take responsibility for one’s neighbor as much as for oneself.<sup>12</sup>

According to Anca Bocăneț, Marcel Iancu’s architectural practice secured him a wealthy bourgeois living,<sup>13</sup> which allowed him to paint without constraints and to fund magazines and art shows; in short, to participate in and contribute to the almost explosively pluralistic Romanian avant-garde in every possible way like no one else. A 1930 description by the writer Sandu Eliade speaks not only of Iancu’s personality but also of the multiplicity of modes of artistic expression and ideas flourishing in the Romanian capital at the time. Eliade points to Iancu’s engagement as painter, sculptor, graphic artist, architect, editor, and writer and defines him as an “unpredictable person,” a “prolix personality” who has paid tribute to every giant in art, to expressionism, cubism, and constructivism; according to Eliade, Iancu is a true initiator and a catalyst.<sup>14</sup> Another contemporary witness, the actress Dida Solomon, who kept her own salon in Bucharest around 1925–1926 for all those who “wished to escape the stifling forms of the past,” says in an interview in the journal *Clopotul* in 1934 that Marcel Iancu, “to whom modern Bucharest owes so much,” “was towering above everything and everyone” in regard to the new trends and currents in everything from modern literature to painting, architecture, and theater, and all the issues discussed in the salon every Tuesday, a salon covering the “whole” avant-garde and much more.<sup>15</sup>



FIGURE 13.1

Marcel Iancu, self-portrait in

*Contimporanul*, 1923.

Academia Română, Bucharest.

As mentioned earlier, Marcel Iancu did not rest on his laurels on his return to Bucharest and soon stood at the center of the new artistic modes of expression directed against the cultural establishment there. As soon as Iancu and his family had settled down in the new house on Strada Trinității, he started his second phase of engagement in such activities, which soon meant that he became a sort of a spider in the web of the Romanian avant-garde, extremely active and keeping an international profile in the twenties and thirties, partly due to his reputation as one of the dadaists in Zurich but mainly thanks to his skills in organizing, his power of initiative, his artistic courage in regard to painting, literature, and especially architecture, and his power of cultivating international contacts of vital importance for the avant-garde.

During the winter or sometime in the spring of 1922, the old friends of the *Simbolul* circle, now ten years older, gathered again in Bucharest, and on 3 June Eugen Iovanaki, now calling himself Ion Vinea, Jacques Costin, and Marcel Iancu were able to present the inaugural issue of the new journal *Contimporanul*, incomparably the most important and also the most long-lived journal of the Romanian avant-garde. It was published up to 1932, at first every week, after the tenth issue every second week or monthly, in the end quite irregularly. During its first years the journal was a more or less specific voice for social criticism of the political establishment and for progressive aesthetics, promising to criticize everything standing in the way of the emergence of a modern, vital, and creative culture. This was a promise mainly realized by publishing regularly the contemporary and internationally noticed modernist manifestos, for instance Theo van Doesburg's manifesto "against the artist as imitator" in 1923, André Breton's first surrealist manifesto in the same year (1924) as the manifesto was published in Paris, and, of course, the editors' own "Activist Manifesto to the Young" in May 1924, signed by Ion Vinea, in which established art was rejected since it had prostituted itself while the manifesto searched, by means of a characteristic "dadaist" and "futurist" rhetoric, for a new art and a new literature following activist principles:

*Down with Art—For it has prostituted itself!*  
*Poetry is no more than a presser to squeeze the lachrymal gland of the girls of any age;*  
*Theatre: a prescription for the melancholy of canned food dealers;*  
*Literature: an obsolete clyster;*



*Drama: a jar full of painted foetuses;*  
*Painting: nature's diaper, hung in the job exchange of a Salon;*  
*Music: a means of locomotion to heaven;*  
*Sculpture: the science of dorsal pawings;*  
*Politics: the pursuit of undertakers and middlemen;*  
*The moon: a brothel window knocked at by the ponces of the hackneyed and the starving beggars of the Art's caravans.*

WE WANT

*the miracle of the word, new and whole by itself; the plastic expression, pointed and quick, of the Morse telegraphs.*

THEREFORE

*death to the epopee-novel and to the psychological novel;*  
*the anecdote and the sentimental story, realism, exoticism, and the romanesque should remain the concern of clever reporters (today a good feature report can replace any long novel of adventure or analysis);*

*We want a theatre of pure emotion, theatre as a new existence, rid of the threadbare clichés of bourgeois life, rid of the obsession with meanings and orientations.*

*We want the fine arts to be free from sentimentalism, literature and anecdote, an expression of pure forms and colors related to themselves.*

*(A modern photographic camera can replace all the painting to date, as well as the naturalistic artist's sensibility.)*

*We want to do away with self-promotion as a purpose, in order to aim at integral art—the hallmark of the great periods (Hellenistic, Roman, Gothic, Byzantine, etc.)—and at the simplification of techniques down to the frugality of the primitive forms (all folk arts, Romanian ceramics and tapestry, etc.).*

*Romania is being built today.*

*Despite the perplexed political parties, we enter into the great industrial-activist stage. Our towns, roads, bridges, the plants to be built, the spirit, rhythm, and style they will entail cannot be adulterated by Byzantinism and louisnthism, and overwhelmed by anachronisms.*

*Let us destroy, through the strength of disseminated disgust, the ghosts cowering under light.*

*Let us dispatch our dead!<sup>16</sup>*

The call to get rid of the dead is not only a proud battle cry but also an obvious reference to the call of the manifesto of the futurist painters fourteen years earlier to clear away all the “mummies” from the “threshold of the future.”<sup>17</sup> Notable also is the fact that Vinea, informed of the activities in Zurich by frequent correspondence with both Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco, had kept the Romanian pot boiling during the war, actively preparing the launching of the dadaist ideas in Romania. Thus for instance he asked the dadaists in Zurich if they would pay a short visit at least and organize an exhibition in the Romanian capital, telling them that the manifestations in Zurich were “an enormous success” in Bucharest, especially in regard to the “pure madness,” which was “highly appreciated.”<sup>18</sup> The fact that Vinea kept himself informed is shown also by the poem “Subiect,” written in 1916, in which he directly refers to Emmy Hennings and Cabaret Voltaire:

*Emmy Hennings wrote:*

*“the fisherman’s daughter from Batavia.”*

*(My friends in Switzerland told me  
of this during the war, in 1915, Cabaret Voltaire.)*

*In Batavia the houses are moaning, like the mills  
here, by us  
the words are barefoot like the birds.*

*The fisherman’s daughter from Batavia  
tears to pieces the wool of the storms,  
her steps on the beach dig  
the graves.*

*The saint crucified on the burnt cross  
gives a sign to the lonely sail  
like a gray mother.  
The fisherman’s daughter from Batavia,  
unknown song,  
you remember all this,  
the water is bitter.<sup>19</sup>*

If it took two years for *Contimporanul* to develop into a full-blown avant-garde magazine of international standards, the journal started by referring back to the “scientific and literary” magazine with the same name which the socialists had founded in Iași in 1881 and whose theoretical profile was shaped mainly by Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, one of the major representatives of the socialist movement in Romania explicitly pleading for a realistic and didactic literature with a clear political content.<sup>20</sup> The new magazine’s words of welcome, signed by Nicolae Lupu, wished the magazine the same success as the old one had had during ten years as one of Romania’s most influential political magazines and hoped that the thoughts and ideas of the new generation would break the Promethean chains by which capitalism, especially foreign capital, had chained the woods of the Romanian mountains, the fresh water of the rivers, and the rich grain fields in the same way as it had paralyzed political power by suppressing public opinion.<sup>21</sup> However, the new journal didn’t sing with only one voice: in his first leading article Ion Vinea, the editor alongside Marcel Iancu, resolutely and eloquently took exception to a possible association with the old journal and declared indirectly that the new magazine would be connected with liberalism rather than with socialism. However, he added, in the Romanian press the old magazine signaled a beginning of a spiritual revolution gradually resulting in quite a number of democratic reforms, today ridiculed and made a laughingstock.

Vinea also could not resist referring to his own *Chemarea*, which according to him attacked the hatred and intolerance propagated by learned men and politicians of the nation in favor of anti-Semitism and the rich classes. And still today, he added, it is both dangerous and difficult to defend humanism and democratic principles, since “we live the moments of the most intensified ire.” Political morals and customs have never been so grotesque as now, when crime has become a normal way of governing. The unconscious and timorous public must be awakened; success is not impossible, because even the dog smelling its own dirt will detest it. Indeed, the journal promised to raise the sword against everything standing in the way of the emerging modern, vital, and creative culture, and this was a promise that *Contimporanul* would really fulfill, particularly during the first years of its existence and in its capacity as a forum for strongly avant-gardist and politically opposing voices criticizing, for instance, governmental politics concerning Greater Romania and the emerging fascist movement. Like almost no other among the journals and actors in cultural life,<sup>22</sup>

*Contimporanul* repeatedly criticized the country's official policies on minorities and pointed more than once at anti-Semitic legislation and other forms of anti-Semitism, for instance the *numerus clausus* principle in the educational system, in which the majority of the students, according to F. Aderca in the December 1922 issue of *Contimporanul*, had turned into hooligans going berserk at the universities while the government did nothing to stop the riots against the Jews.<sup>23</sup>

Once again the writers must step to the barricades, demands George M. Vlădescu in the ninth issue of *Contimporanul*, and refers to a time when the chosen dreamers, the poets, and the idealists, sometimes celebrated, sometimes crucified, maintained the faith and the hope of the people, the nations, and humankind. Today Romania is led by blockheads imagining they are great statesmen while the parliament is paralyzed by shoutings and cries, the currency goes up and down, values honored yesterday are now defamed, everything makes a true madhouse—and the writers are silent, living a wild life in their ivory towers. Indeed, the writers must take responsibility.<sup>24</sup> G. Spina is of the same opinion in the same issue, pointing to the fact that Romania after the war has a population of eighteen million consisting of several different nationalities and a growing proletariat which must be observed. The writers must describe and fight for these poor people made more dull and silly by callous political leaders. But what do the writers do today? Nothing whatsoever. According to Spina, Romanian literature consists of endless love stories. The writers consider themselves an intellectual elite for whom it is humiliating to approach the masses, those who are not in any way able to understand the more or less original pieces, the “decadentism” and their “free” verses. The Romanian writer is an exponent of silly coffeehouses and coteries locked inside their own navel-gazing.<sup>25</sup>

According to T. Robes, writing in the nineteenth issue of *Contimporanul*, there is no longer any literature that can be defined as specifically Romanian in the same way as it is still possible to point to, for instance, a German, Russian, or Norwegian literature. The French influence is too strong. Romania lacks strong feelings, the whole nation is flexible, manageable, compliant, amenable, and ambiguous, and the Romanians themselves are superficial, easily tired when it comes to intellectual work. Romania lacks strong, original authors who can be esteemed internationally, and everything written up to now, including the writings of Eminescu, is good only for the Romanians themselves.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, in relation to the almost masochistically cultivated notion of the provincialism of Romanian art and literature, it is not very surprising that Marcel Iancu did everything possible to place both himself and the new journal at the center of international modernism, having a sufficiently big network of contacts and fresh experiences. The reproductions published in the journal during the first years signal its international ambition:<sup>27</sup> the journal published contributions by, for instance, Alexander Archipenko, Georges Braque, Theo van Doesburg, Juan Gris, Walter Gropius, Fernand Léger, Joan Miró, László Moholy-Nagy, Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Richter, Herwarth Walden, Tristan Tzara, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Hans Arp, and André Breton, at the same time as Iancu personally corresponded with, among others, Michel Seuphor in Antwerp, Herwarth Walden in Berlin, Kurt Schwitters in Hannover, Enrico Prampolini in Rome, Sidney Hunt in London, and Theo van Doesburg, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Max Ernst, Paul Eluard, Jean Cocteau, and Robert Delaunay in Paris. Iancu also saw to it that the journal introduced new international magazines and lampoons and published translated texts from other international journals, for instance from *Linze* in Liège, *Blok* in Warsaw, *Correspondance* and *Les 7 arts* in Brussels, *De Stijl* in Amsterdam, *Der Sturm* in Berlin, *La vie des lettres et des arts*, *Le mouvement accéléré*, and *Les feuilles libres* in Paris, *Ma* in Budapest, *Merz* in Hannover, *Pasmo* in Brno, *Zenit* in Belgrade, *Noi* in Rome, *Stavba* and *Disk* in Prague, and *Monomètre* in Lyon. Already during the third year of the journal Iancu could receive a kind of indirect international acknowledgment when Hugo Ball sent him a postcard telling him that one could buy *Contimporanul* in Rome, of all places.

Iancu himself contributed to *Contimporanul* with about forty articles and essays, about thirty linoleum and wood engravings, as many portrait drawings, some twenty photos of his own buildings, and some ten architectural sketches and plan drawings, at the same time as he edited several special feature issues, about the new architecture, about Brâncuși, about the new theater and the new film. Together with the editorial staff he made the journal into a kind of “cultural company” as well, an enterprise in the heart of the Romanian capital on 53 Strada Imprimerie, where the editorial office, according to contemporary photos,<sup>28</sup> had at least three rooms connected with each other by a corridor painted in “ultramodern” style recalling neoplasticism with overlapping rectangles spreading along both the walls and the ceilings more or less independently of the architectural elements. The journal published post-

cards as well in the name of Editura Contimporanul, among them one depicting Brâncuși in his studio in Paris, and organized a huge number of soirées with recitations, music, and dance, of which the most renowned was the one organized in May 1925 at Teatrul Popular, at which, for instance, poems by Philippe Soupault, Ion Benjamin, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Ion Vinea, and Herwarth Walden were read while the music ranged from a march, an “elephant dance,” and a couple of “chants nègres” to a waltz by Sibelius and a gavotte by Prokofiev. After a “rhythmic dance,” Nikolai Evreinov’s commedia dell’arte play *Moarte veselă* (A Merry Death) was performed; Marcel Iancu was responsible for the stage setting and Sandu Eliade for the direction. Iancu had begun working for the avant-gardist theater in Bucharest the year before and now planned the costumes of the characters of the play, among them Harlequin, Pierrot, Colombina, “the doctor,” and death himself, all of them reproduced in *Contimporanul*.<sup>29</sup>

The journal’s most ambitious and most important effort to increase the understanding of and to promote modern vanguard art in Romania was staged as a more or less Dada-like spectacle strongly reminiscent of the soirées at Cabaret Voltaire. *Contimporanul*’s first big international art exhibition opened in Bucharest on 30 November 1924 with more than one hundred works by Romanian and foreign artists, among them the entire Romanian avant-garde with artists such as Marcel Iancu, Max Herman Maxy, Hans Mattis-Teutsch, Milița Petrașcu, and Victor Brauner, who were shown in the company of such internationally known artists as Hans Arp, Hans Richter, Kurt Schwitters, Paul Klee, Erich Buchholz, Viking Eggeling, Karel Teige, Lajos Kassák, Constantin Brâncuși, and Arthur Segal. According to the art historian Krisztina Passuth, Max Herman Maxy was the most important organizer of the exhibition; she refers to Iancu as the other organizer, while Vinea is mentioned as the one who had been laying the intellectual and artistic groundwork in Bucharest.<sup>30</sup> The exhibition itself was a kind of omnium gatherum of paintings, prints, and sculptures accompanied by all sorts of East Asian and Ceylonese “primitive” objects, Dida Solomon’s puppets, and more or less imaginative furniture designed by, among others, Iancu and Maxy. Iancu, Maxy, and Vinea were responsible for the scandalous opening. According to the aesthetician Tudor Vianu,<sup>31</sup> describing the event in the journal *Mișcarea literară*, the dark hall was crowded when Eugen Filotti was to make his opening speech, which he apparently succeeded in doing despite an indescribable

confusion, noise, and row. Suddenly a drumroll was heard. The light was directed from the lecturer toward the stage on which a real jazz band began playing unrestrainedly noisy music with the help of different stringed, wind, and percussion instruments, which, of course, left nobody in doubt that this was in fact a modernist ritual à la Dada, especially when one of the musicians was black, a “genuine negro,” who, furthermore, was playing on “devilish” drums.<sup>32</sup> According to Vianu, one had to wait quite a while before one was able to see the exhibition itself. The success was evident, the scandal a fact.

A proof of the success is also the fact that the exhibition even permeated literature. In Camil Petrescu’s novel *Patul lui Procust*, published in 1933,<sup>33</sup> the walls of the exhibition hall of the Syndicate of Plastic Arts near Calea Victoriei and the Ateneul were dressed in burlap and illuminated from above by some sort of small zinc pipes that housed white bulbs like theater footlights. In the hall itself there were some low easy chairs in “American style” made of one piece of thick wood cut into black slices alternating with yellowish ones; the chairs were designed by Maxy and Iancu, and, according to Petrescu, they all sported an easy air of improvisation, of theatrical decor. The paintings, “with a geometry of long rays and concentric circles,” suggested the apocalypse.

Interesting enough in this context is also the fact that Max Herman Maxy,<sup>34</sup> soon one of the major artists in the Romanian avant-garde along with Mattis-Teutsch and Brauner, was a pupil not only of Camil Rescu but also of Iosif Iser, from whom—as mentioned before—Marcel Iancu had learned the basics before moving to Zurich. Maxy had also got into touch with Arthur Segal, the November Group, and other leftist artists, architects, and writers in Berlin, where he met also with Herwarth Walden, who took a special interest in Eastern European art by exhibiting, for instance, Ivan Puni, Alexander Archipenko, and several Hungarian modernists—and in 1922 Maxy and his prismatic cubism as well. A few months after the 1924 exhibition in Bucharest, Maxy founded the “studio of constructivist art” in Bucharest in cooperation with Victor Brauner and Corneliu Michăilescu, inspired by the Bauhaus; later this became the academy of decorative arts on Strada Câmpineanu with departments of fine art, architecture, interior design, furniture design, and advertising graphics, at which Marcel Iancu was appointed teacher of both architecture and interior design.<sup>35</sup> Despite the fact that Maxy never became a pronounced constructivist, he was able to enthu-

siastically claim in 1926 that “a new constructivist era” had begun, that “the constructivist enthusiasm wraps the whole world in a bath of reinforced concrete,” and that the new materials—iron, glass, concrete, wood—now finally correspond with the artistic gesture.<sup>36</sup> Referring to the fact that so many Romanians had actively taken part in international modernism, Maxy rejected the notion that the Romanian avant-garde was only “a system of spiritual gymnastics borrowed from the West” instead of being fully integrated in the European “spiritual landscape,” which, according to him, was confirmed also by “the case of Brâncuși.”<sup>37</sup>

Marcel Iancu, Constantin Brâncuși, Arthur Segal, and other participants in the *Contimporanul* exhibition were born and grew up in Romania (or in areas incorporated into Romania after 1918) but belonged as well to international modernism. This was the case especially when it came to Hans Mattis-Teutsch,<sup>38</sup> who was counted among the major Romanian avant-gardists despite the fact that he was born and grew up in a German-speaking family in Kronstadt (today Brașov) in the Hungarian Siebenbürgen in Transylvania and despite the fact that he had been a student in an art school in Budapest and in both Anton Ažbe’s school and the Bavarian royal academy of fine arts in Munich. In Munich he met, among others, with Marianne Werefkin, Alexej Jawlensky, Ernst Stern, and other artists grouped around the artistic and literary cabaret Elf Scharfritter, one of the prototypes of Cabaret Voltaire. Besides visiting Paris at the beginning of the century he got into touch with, for instance, Franz Marc and other German expressionists in Berlin as well, met with Arthur Segal, and was inspired by Kandinsky’s *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. Mattis-Teutsch had made his debut in 1913 at the autumn salon of Der Sturm in Budapest, when he also joined the circle of Lajos Kassák, who wrote the introduction for his first one-man exhibition in Budapest in 1917. After having joined Der Sturm in Berlin he exhibited along with, for instance, Archipenko, Klee, Chagall, and Gleizes two years after moving to Bucharest in 1918–1919, only to introduce his lyrical and strongly coloristic constructivist art in the exhibition of 1924.

Thanks to Marcel Iancu’s experiences and contacts and Ion Vinea’s interest in the latest trends, *Contimporanul* didn’t lack self-confidence either when it came to its international orientation, which was strengthened still more by the fact that several of its contributors—among them Tristan Tzara, Max Herman Maxy, Hans Mattis-Teutsch, and Benjamin Fundoianu—either were abroad or had earlier lived in some of



the European metropolises. On publishing the 100th issue in October-November 1931 the team of *Contimporanul* briefly summed up their activities in a manifesto-like text, filled with an air of proud independence: “We neither imitated, nor did we vicariously repeat modes, nor did we spell out anything whatsoever. . . . We were not among those who responded to any appeal launched by others; in fact we were among those who raised the banner in Europe.”<sup>39</sup> Two years after the publishing of the last issue, Jacques Costin declared that the revolution took place “without ostentation” and that the success of the first demonstrations in writing, fine arts, and architecture was due to “the chosen moment, to the indomitable curiosity, and first and foremost, to the intrinsic quality of the work of art.” Costin also said that the program aimed at winning through persuasion, avoiding attacks, invectives, and insults: “The slogan was the *creation* itself and not a warlike declaration. . . . Our creed was neither narrow-minded nor was it fanatical.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite the devastation of the war, Marcel Iancu hardly took off in some kind of cultural vacuum on his return to Bucharest. The ground for ultramodern and vanguard efforts was well prepared, and many already stood—so to speak—stamping in the entrance hall to taste the buffet soon to be served, while others sorted out the ingredients in the kitchen. One of them was Benjamin Wechsler, who in connection with his debut in the journal *Valuri* in 1912 began to use his pseudonym Benjamin Fundoianu,<sup>41</sup> a pseudonym that he transformed into Benjamin Fondane in Paris in 1923. Like Arthur Segal, he was born in Iași and appeared, according to Sașa Pană, already at the time of Iancu’s arrival as the “stooping green-eyed youth from Iași, the standard-bearer of the iconoclasts and rebels of the new generation” around whom grouped “all those euphoric young men believing that they had something to say,” circulating around him like butterflies around a flame. These young men were mainly writers such as Sandu Eliade, Ion Calagaru, Ilarie Voronca, Mihail Cosma, Stephan Roll, and F. Brunea-Fox, all of whom also joined the group around *Contimporanul* as soon as the inaugural issue of the new journal was launched. At the same time some of them were engaged in the avant-gardist theater project *Insula*, which Fundoianu, inspired by the theater concept of Jean Cocteau, started in the same year together with his brother-in-law Armand Pascal and Sandu Eliade, who become the director of the short-lived theater, answering for the practical matters and everyday activities in

the small theater premises with about one hundred seats, which the group got hold of despite severe financial problems. The economic situation together with anti-Semitic protests brought the theater to its knees just one year after the premiere. Like all avant-garde groups in the early part of the century, Insula had to start its activities—of course—with a manifesto, written by Fundoianu, in which those responsible expressed their disgust toward contemporary “industrialized” theater and their will to achieve something else than what was usually labeled as theater, and invited all those who held an affinity with art to contribute with their “intelligence and taste”; “indeed, all those will find friends and fellows here.”<sup>42</sup>

Fundoianu, perhaps the most vanguard of all modernists of the Romanian avant-garde in regard to both his bohemian lifestyle and his poems (published in various avant-garde journals such as *Rampa* and Vinea’s *Chemarea* before his emigration to Paris in 1923 and up to his tragic death in Birkenau in 1944), declared himself that he would never accept an idea if he was not able to trace its history. He himself had grown up in a Jewish family; his maternal grandfather was a good friend of Caragiale, his mother knew both Eminescu and Ion Creangă, and he in his early youth met Densusianu, Minulescu, and Arghezi. From the beginning he related his own background to the Jewish culture by, for instance, publishing “biblical songs” in such Yiddish journals as *Hatikvah*, *Lumea evree*, and *Bar Kochba* while preparing himself for the biblical, metaphysical play *Tagaduința lui Petru*, published in 1918. This play, recalling the “pantheism” of Hasidism, is also strongly present in his collection of poems *Privești panoramas*, published in 1930, in which he reflects upon the Ein Sof-like emptiness, the primordial unity with the ultimate mystery of creation,<sup>43</sup> a circumstance that not only confirms Fundoianu’s own cultural sources but also seems to point to the general premises of the Romanian avant-garde in the Jewish culture, to which the majority of the avant-gardists belonged in one way or another.

As a phenomenon, the avant-garde is often defined by reference to the military origin of the term as an advance guard preparing the ground for the advance of the real army into the enemy’s territory. But in fact the cultural avant-garde has often been a matter of groups of combatants fighting one another, or units advancing at different speeds—either left behind by or even more vanguard than other avant-gardist groups. To define the interwar artistic and literary groups in Romania as “the

# AVIOGRAMA

(IN LOC DE MANIFEST)

CETITOR DEPARAZITEAZA-TI CREIERUL

HERMETIC SOMNUL LOCOMOTIVEI PESTE BALCOANE EQUATOR

PULSEAZĂ ANUNȚ VAST **TREBUIE** DINAMIC SERVICIU MARITIM

**ARTISTUL NU IMITĂ ARTISTUL CREAȚA**

**LINIA CUVÂNTUL CULOAREA PE CARE N'O GĂSEȘTI IN DICȚIONAR**

VIBREAZĂ DIAPAZON SECOLUL

HIPISM ACSENSOR DACTILO-CINEMATOGRAF

## INVENTEAZĂ INVENTEAZĂ

### ARTA SURPRIZA

GRAMATICA LOGICA SENTIMENTALISMUL CA AGĂȚĂTOARE DE RUFEE

PE FRÂNGHII CHIAMĂ ÎNPĂRĂȚIA AFIȘELOR LUMINOASE

CHERRY-BRANDY VIN TRANS-URBAN CĂI FERATE CEA MAI

FRUMOASĂ POEZIE: FLUCTUAȚIA DOLARULUI

TELEGRAFUL A ȚESUT CURCUBEE DE SĂRMĂ

IRADIATOR DECLANȘEAZĂ STIGMAT **a c d** ALFABET DENTAR

STENOGRAFIE ASTRALĂ SĂ VIE

SÂNGERAREA CUVÂNTULUI

METALIC LEPĂDAREA FORMU-

LELOR PURGATIVE ȘI CÂND

FORMULĂ VA DEVENI CEEACE

FACEM NE VOM LEPĂDA ȘI DE

NOI IN AERUL ANESTEZIAT

CABLOGRAME CÂNTĂ DIAȘTOLA STELELOR DEVALIZAT GÂNDUL

PIANUL MECANIC SERVEȘTE CAFEAUA CU LAPTE ELEGANT

O! RECITĂRILE O! SERBĂRILE DE BINEFACERE UN PERMIS DE SINUCIDERE

3 DINARI TROTUARUL ȘI-A PLOMBAT DINȚII IN SPIRALĂ

REGIM LACTAT MANIVELA IN TIMPAN

BULEVARD CITEȘTE ORIENT EXPRES ANTRACIT AUTOBUZ EMBRION

MIRAJ CLORHIDRIC IMPOSSIBIL REALIZAT CE OCHI MĂRUNȚI

CA ZAHĂR PISAT INCEST CORTEGIU

ABSTRACT AGENȚIE DE SCHIMB TRANSATLANTIC VEȘTILE SE

CIOCNESC CA LA BILLIARD AVIOANE

# 75HP.

PARIS  
LONDRA  
T S M

NEW-YORK

BERLIN

COBOARĂ CA BAROMETRE ARDE COLIERUL DE FARURI EUROPA

ARE CRAMPE INGHITE STĂLPII COMUNALI INUTIL CÂT POȚI CONFORTABIL

INFINITUL IN PANTOFI DE CASĂ ANUNȚĂ

BISEXUALITATE ATLET URMĂREȘTE DISCURSUL RECIPROC GAZETELE SE DESCHID

CA FERESTRE INCEPE CONCERTUL SECOLULUI

ASCENSOR SUNĂ INTERBANCAR JAZZ SALTINBANC CLAXON

**FABEMOL**

**RE**

**FABEMOL**

**IN**

**PIJAMA**

**FOOTBALL**

ILARIE VORONCA

FIGURE 13.2

Page from 75HP with

Ilarie Voronca's

manifesto "Aviograma,"

October 1924.

Romanian avant-garde” is, strictly speaking, not only misleading but also just wrong, if the term doesn’t encompass the mutual hostilities among various groups (even though, in the Romanian case, one group might enlist particular individuals belonging to an antagonistic group). Thus, Ion Vinea was able to contribute to the pronouncedly iconoclastic journal *75HP*, which was explicitly directed against *Contimporanul*; the former counted among its contributors also both Marcel Iancu and Max Herman Maxy, though both were members of the editorial staff of *Contimporanul*. Characteristically enough, Marcel Iancu contributed also with both essays and drawings to the journal *Punct* even before this was fused with *Contimporanul* in the spring of 1925, only a few months after its inaugural issue in November 1924 and only five months after *Contimporanul*’s call to the youth to get rid of the dead. Typical of the situation also is the fact that *Punct*, at first in unrestrained revolt against *Contimporanul*, was edited at Iancu’s home at the same time as Iancu himself was working at the editorial office of *Contimporanul* on Strada Imprimerie.

The man behind *75HP*,<sup>44</sup> named after a popular car with seventy-five horsepower, was Ilarie Voronca, a twenty-one-year-old poet born in Brăila who had already made a name for himself for dadaistically incomprehensible poems and who now, together with the artist Victor Brauner and the poet Stephan Roll (Gheorghe Dinu) of the same age, challenged the leading position of *Contimporanul* by attacking the journal’s efforts to become a modernist institution in Romania instead of constantly being on the move, constantly questioning its own points of departure. Marcel Iancu accused the upstarts of being “deviating rebels,” whereupon these, of course, immediately answered that they would recruit all those radical poets and artists who could be counted among the “real” Romanian avant-garde and that they finally would seriously transcend the “laxative formalities” in favor of the principles of the modern experience and the new technology. Voronca’s “manifesto,” according to Mansbach actually written by Alexandru Cernat, who himself declared that modern intellectuals operate “at the speed of a sixty-story elevator,”<sup>45</sup> marked an epoch not only because of the unusually aggressive futurist tone but also by its “pictopoetic” appearance, carried out through the subsequent pages of the journal, where gaudy letters, fragments of sentences, and abstract visual elements formed a collagelike whole suggesting both the Dada publications and the new Bauhaus aesthetics. The atmosphere was exorbitant, the futurist influences almost overexplicit:

THE ARTIST DOESN'T IMITATE THE ARTIST CREATES  
THE LINES OF THE WORD COLOR YOU CAN'T FIND IN DICTIONARY  
VIBRATES CENTURY-TUNING FORK  
HORSE RACES ELEVATOR TYPING-CINEMA  
INVENT INVENT

SURPRISE ART

GRAMMAR LOGIC EMOTIONALISM  
AS LINEN PINS  
ON ROPES THE KINGDOM OF LUMINOUS  
POSTERS CALLS  
CHERRY-BRANDY TRANSURBAN WINE RAILWAYS  
THE MOST  
BEAUTIFUL POEM: THE DOLLAR FLUCTUATION  
THE TELEGRAPH HAS WOVEN WIRE RAINBOWS  
IRRADIATOR STARTS OFF STIGMA *acd* DENTAL  
ALPHABET

ASTRAL SHORTHAND  
BLEEDING WORD TO COME  
METALLIC THE DENIAL OF PURG-ING  
FORMULAS AND WHEN  
WHAT WE'RE DOING  
BECOMES FORMULA  
WE'LL DENY OURSELVES, TOO  
IN THE ANESTHETIZED AIR

...

THEY GO DOWN LIKE BAROMETERS THE EUROPE  
LIGHTHOUSE NECKLACE IS BURNING  
HAS CRAMPS SWALLOWS DISTRICT PILLARS USELESS COMFORTABLE

AS MUCH AS YOU CAN  
THE INFINITE IN SLIPPERS MAKES AN ANNOUNCEMENT  
BISEXUALITY ATHLETE FOLLOW THE  
MUTUAL SPEECH NEWSPAPERS OPEN  
LIKE WINDOWS THE CONCERT OF THE CENTURY BEGINS  
ELEVATOR RINGS INTER-BANK CLOWN-LIKE JAZZ  
HORN  
FLAT  
D

F FLAT

IN

PAJAMAS

FOOTBALL<sup>46</sup>

75HP promised to become “an eternal inventor” against all kinds of conventions, including *Contimporanul*’s modernism. Raging at the government’s unbridled corruption and disillusioned at the intellectuals’ weak or lacking efforts to fight this, Voronca and Brauner heckled modern literature, calling it “the best toilet paper of the century,” at the same time as they accused traditional painting of being an “academic onanism of oil tubes” and urged the artists and the writers to “piss on everything,” to “drink sulfuric acid,” and to decapitate themselves at least twice a week. The highest goal of 75HP was to achieve “a true synthesis” by which the traditional border between art and poetry would be transcended and replaced by a mechanistic, fully modern aesthetics, namely “pictopoetry,” which would unite all the disciplines and artistic modes of expression. According to Voronca, the word must be reinvented, and this can be done only by combining words that refuse to cooperate. The result was a seemingly incomprehensible morphological and syntactic amalgam. Pictopoetry would be the last cry of the present moment; for instance, every dandy must dress himself in costumes designed according to the pictopoetic trends, since pictopoetry would permeate everything and light up the sky like Bengal lights, achieving the impossible. The example in the October issue of 1924 is more or less characteristic of the eagerly awaited poetic practice:



PICTOPOETRY

INVENTED BY VICTOR BRAUNER & ILARIE VORONCA

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5  
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2  
1

BY VICTOR BRAUNER & ILARIE VORONCA

PICTOPOETRY IS NOT PAINTING

PICTOPOETRY IS NOT POETRY

PICTOPOETRY IS PICTOPOETRY<sup>47</sup>

Voronca, who declared that he consciously rejected banal, grammatically correct sentences because logic doesn't fit together with creativity, would mix, for instance, French and Romanian phrases in his own absurd but ardent poetry, as in the poem telling of the archangel being an excellent head accountant, published in 75HP in 1924:



# PUNCT No. 1

REVISTA DE LITERATURA ARTA CONSTRUCTIVISTA  
15 NOEMBRIE 1924

## L'ORREILLE A CAREAUX

in oglindă  
jurnal subsecelar fugărit și  
toate ciopotele joacă miliard  
(asta începe să devie plictașor)  
eleștione domnilor globetrotter-  
ul e 10', virgulă! de ce nu mă  
înțelegi na vreau nu mă înțelegi  
na mă înțic nu nu nu alb. Le ser-  
gent de ville: Da Domnilor acest  
filosof născut la începutul ve-  
cului da domnilor da domnilor  
da domn da domn da doooooomn  
da dooooo re (bemoi) waram  
regăsit da ? — pour résoudre  
le problème de la mécanique  
uxor mercatoris urech marca la  
staj aproximativ qui peut dire  
to amo la amă epili ama. Clary  
Clary est-ce-qu'il faut être sen-  
simental ?—Non madam. Creșteră:  
sici începe robai meu, sicșai ;  
tei commence mon rôle, so-  
fagat: hier fangt meine rolle an  
ochăi sâng: qui commence il  
sein roll ste fan roll : sici începe  
teima mea ton vînea: trebuie să  
schimbăm trenul scarlat căl-  
machi: trebuie să-l schimbăm  
pe A marcel iancu: trebuie să-l  
schimbăm pe B maxy: trebuie  
să-l schimbăm pe C victor bran-  
nar : il faut changer le 3 aste  
tră este absolut calendar.

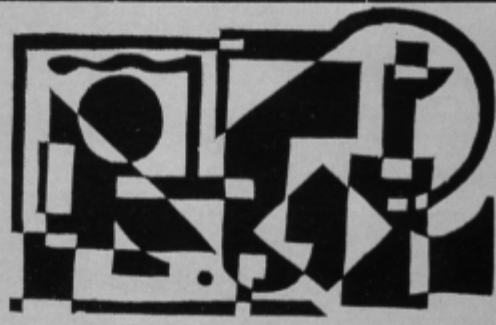
ILARIE VORONCA

## AEVEA

SI SANGE SI NEBUNIE  
VEACURI SI ALBE MARI  
CREDINȚI SI  
CADAVERICE PARFUMURI  
Neant  
Tăceri  
Necunoscute  
si UMBRE... UMBRE...  
O frunte și sânge pe spini de aur

SEBASTIEN CALLECHACH

Construire  
Construire  
Construire  
Détruire  
Détruire  
Rien  
Rien



LINDOUM VICTOR BRADNOR

La littérature a besoin d'injections frigorifiques. PH 75 IIIIC  
TOURNANU IIIIC CONTINPORANU  
Painires steppes sur vos tolles

FIGURE 13.4

Punct, no. 1, 15 November 1924.

STANZA I

Monsieur l'archange est  
un bon chef comptable  
Eurydice: let me fasten your eyes  
with safety pins  
that is enough please  
no mathematical allusions  
Eurydice I go to sleep

STANZA II

Eurydice I go to sleep  
that is enough please no mathematical allusions  
Eurydice: let me fasten your eyes with safety pins  
Monsieur l'archange est un bon chef comptable.<sup>48</sup>

Voronca refused to stop fighting the establishment, and only one month after the first and only issue of 75HP he launched the weekly magazine *Punct* along with Scarlat Callimachi and in collaboration with, among others, Marcel Iancu, Ion Vinea, Stephan Roll, Mihail Cosma, and Dida Solomon. The first three issues of this “organ of international constructivist art” didn’t publish any manifesto or other explanatory texts, though a multilingual prose poem by Ilarie Voronca was published in the inaugural issue, strongly influenced by Dada, a poem that Saşa Pană much later defined as a sort of manifesto “for the future”<sup>49</sup> and which Voronca gave the (misspelled) French title “L’orreille à careaux”:

S..... in the mirror diary deputy secretary chased and  
all the bells play billiards (it's boring) attention please gentlemen the globe  
trotter is 10% virginal why don't you understand me I don't want you don't  
understand me I don't eat no no no white. *Le sergent de ville*: Yes Gentlemen this  
philosopher born at the beginning of the century yes gentlemen yes ladies yes

*gentlemen of the dome yes geeeeentlemen yes dooooo re warum regnäst du?—  
pour résoudre le problème de la mécanique uxor mercatoris go upstairs mark  
approximately qui peut dire io amo tu ami egli ama. Clary Clary est-ce-qu'il faut  
être sentimental? . . . Nem tudom. The brain: here my role begins, the liver: ici  
commence mon rôle, the esophagus: hier fängt meine rolle an, the left eye: qui  
comincia il mio roll stefan roll; here my heart begins ion vinea; we have to change  
train scarlat callimachi; we have to change A marcel iancu; we have to change  
B maxy; we have to change C victor brauner: il faut changer at 3 this absolute  
calendar for me.<sup>50</sup>*

Although the inaugural issue of the quarrelsome new journal didn't publish any real manifesto, Callimachi felt that he had to declare in the leading article of the fourth issue, published in December 1924, that “we have totally broken with the art of the past,” since the new century of strong and lasting emotions needs new modes of expression and manifestation; “we cannot continue delivering artistic products using old—or better to say out of fashion—prescriptions and techniques, because the majority of the so-called past-ridden artists are only mediocre copies of their genius precursors.” According to Callimachi, to get rid of this art the most violent tools must be used, in order to dig a precipice as deep as possible between the works of the constructivist artists and the degenerate works of the sterile artists of the past wallowing in their own mud making desperate, stupid, and comical gestures. What is needed is a fundamental artistic revolution, a destruction of all the submediocre creations of painting, literature, sculpture, and music, even at the cost of violent exaggerations. Step by step the new art must make the public hiss, by their own initiative, at all bad past-ridden art. According to Callimachi, “we can no longer tolerate such imitations” which have prevailed too long: through hard work all the infected and decomposed worms must be destroyed that suck in and make art dirty and filthy. Most of those still admired by school children, cheered by cooks, favored by dishonest and incompetent scribblers must disappear, all those dramatic authors such as Camil Petrescu and Alexander Hertz, all those writers such as Lucia Mantu, I. A. Brătescu-Voinești, and the poporanist poets, the entire group of academic painters, all those must disappear, their age has gone. “We want a new art in a new and free country—we say *vae victis!* to all those weak persons wearing clothes out of fashion.”<sup>51</sup>

It is hardly a coincidence that the former dadaist Marcel Iancu was so unre-servedly engaged in *Punct*, since the journal came as close to international dadaism as was possible in the Romanian cultural climate, a climate that despite occasionally strong outbursts and numerous revolutionary promises was still characterized by moderation and “good manners,” an obvious and often manifested will to cooperation transcending the artistic and ideological borders. Thus, despite the dadaist aspirations, *Punct*, not unlike *De Stijl* in Holland, celebrated modernist architecture in its capacity as “the most perfect synthesis and accomplishment” of all constructivist arts. As in the revolutionary Soviet Union, the artists in the modernized Romania must use the streets to offer the public aesthetic and moral education. Thus the journal devoted much space to Ilarie Voronca’s call for what he called the new “synthetism,” published in the January issue of *Punct* in 1925, only two months before Voronca enthusiastically and eloquently interpreted the new “integralism” in the newly started journal *Integral*, which defined itself as “the journal of the modern synthesis, the organ of the modern movement in our country and abroad” and which lasted up to July 1927, with editorial offices in both Bucharest and Paris.

Referring to those ethical transformations that have always been parallel to social transformations and particularly to technical-scientific ones, Voronca called for a new and synthetic art reflecting the experiments in the scientific laboratories, even preceding them in the same way as the poets—the “unconscious researchers”—had preceded Freudianism and psychoanalytical principles. According to Voronca, the new methods of mathematical and psychological analysis will create a new sensibility and most of all new modes of expressing this sensibility which will be reflected in pedagogy and new educational methods and in the entire social organization as well. Art with its multiplicity of manifestations will be most prolific in this sense, but only art breaking with prevailing conventions and given rules, the art continually raping the spectator’s taste, his eyes and ears, the literature letting the words explode like dynamite, the art creating a new synthesis together with new scientific innovations:

*Poetry, fine arts, drama, music, and especially architecture, all of them converge to a single concord: the synthesis. The experiments of Einstein were synthetic, as well as the research of Freud. There is an impulse of completeness, of synthesis everywhere. There is no fragmentation of art. Thought, fine arts, dance, all*

together express unity. Before contemporary art (as André Salmon has observed), painting was always 20 years behind literature. Today the different arts come closer and closer to each other. Indeed, this is the hard characteristic of the trends today. None of the previous trends did attain such synthetic unity of the diverse forms of art. Today the achievements of synthetic art, poetry, construction announce the **CENTURY-SYNTHESIS**.

...  
The essential word has not been pronounced yet: cubism, futurism, constructivism overflow in the same circle: **SYNTHESIS**.

All human efforts of today and of the past, all achievements in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, chemistry, and engineering cumulate in one single word: **SYNTHETISM**.<sup>52</sup>

Although Voronca claimed that he was the first to utter the magical word “synthetism,” his manifesto-like article can hardly be described as particularly independent, because it is more or less obvious, according to the Romanian scholar Valentin Mihăescu,<sup>53</sup> that Voronca was inspired by Theo van Doesburg’s much more stringent and theoretically more elaborated article “Vers une construction collective,” published in the same issue of *Punct*, at the same time as, inspired by Dada, he had obvious difficulties in accepting Doesburg’s demands for scientific logic and objectivity.

Only a few issues before Ilarie Voronca began his fight for synthetism, Mihail Cosma composed yet another manifesto-like essay on the development from futurism to “integralism.” As Cosma portends, the ideas formulated in *Punct* were to be superseded in a new magazine, *Integral* (although in fact the new journal would be much more moderate and less “futurist” than Cosma’s essay suggests):

*Literature was a two-dimensional form of perceiving the world. However, the modern work of art makes possible new emotional surprises and new ways of perceiving the world in four dimensions. Our material? Every kind of wood, words, tones, iron, colors, emotions, ideas. Our domain? Everything everywhere. The factory, the brothel, man, society. With our heart as the walking stick we*



FIGURE 13.5

*Integral*, no. 4, 1925.

have climbed the mountains. Our poet makes poetry with the help of the typewriter. Our painter paints his compositions with the help of circles and ideas. Our artist is equipped with all possible comforts, precisely like an American skyscraper. We live on the 57th floor. From here the view is intercontinental. Stop.—From the one-sidedness and the stupidity of separated efforts, from having cultivated our sensibility we have reached this enormous contemporary synthesis: integralism.<sup>54</sup>

In an interview published in *Integral* in November 1925, Cosma, soon to be called Claude Sernet, defined integralism as a “scientific and objective” synthesis of all aesthetic modes of expression up to now, futurism, expressionism, cubism, and “suprarealism,” a synthesis built upon the foundations of constructivism and aiming at reflecting “the intense and grand life of our century” characterized by “the cold intelligence of the engineer and the fresh triumph of the athlete.”<sup>55</sup>

*Integral*, whose editorial staff in Bucharest consisted of, among others, Ilarie Voronca, Mihail Cosma, F. Brunea-Fox, and Max Herman Maxy, with Benjamin Fundoianu and Hans Mattis-Teutsch working in Paris, explicitly placed its pages at the disposal of “all” avant-gardists, from the futurists and the constructivists to the expressionists and the dadaists, under the same big umbrella, namely synthetic modernism or “syncretism,” as the integralists liked to call the common denominator.<sup>56</sup> The theoretical approach of the journal was defined in the inaugural issue as a synthesis of all previous efforts united within constructivism and syncretism, but Voronca was very precise in expelling surrealism, which ironically enough hadn’t yet reached Romania, accusing this movement of having “ignored the course of the century,” according to Mansbach a defensive tactic to secure the continued authority of dadaism.<sup>57</sup> While writing dadaist poetry in *Punct*, Voronca declared in *Integral* that surrealism “does not respond to the rhythm of the times,” while integralism—of course—was in step with the age in demanding that the different arts should integrate with each other, like Dada. According to Voronca, constructivism, the major expression of the century, stepped forward out of the conflicts between cubism, futurism, and dadaism; integralism or synthetism is its logical consequence, while surrealism is nothing but “a tardy return to a source of the past.”<sup>58</sup>

Voronca's and Cosma's common manifesto, published in the inaugural issue of *Integral*, is also strongly and palpably influenced by both futurism and dadaism:

We definitely live under the sign of the urban. **Filter-intelligence, surprise-lucidity. Rhythm-speed.** Simultaneous balls—atmospheres giving concerts—billions of saxophones, telegraph nerves from the equator to the poles—strikes of lightning; the planet with flags, industrial plants; i giant steamer; the dance of the machines over bitumen ovations. **A crossroad of an era.** Classes are going down, new economies are being built. The proletarians are imposing forms. New psychophysiology are growing.

Our own inventions have overcome us. **Thought must exceed speed itself.** Vassals to the sluggish dream, we need **suzerainty.** Softened by beatitudes and romantic self-compassions. **We don't want reinforced concrete.** The hypertrophy of the ego has devalued us, currency without a standard. **What an inflation of geniuses!!!**

No archangel-individuals hovering over the society; caught in the machinery we live **in, through, for it.** One used to be representative; but we all represent. **Mechanics passionate with a preoccupation. THAT'S ALL.**

Enough straying among intellectual matters! **Intellectual comics, enough!** You know: **Out of controlled knowledge and despair the style of the great epochs was born; the same causes are generating the style of this epoch.** In the old days, humankind was a psychological pygmy before nature; now, before nature and the moving force we have created.

This is why: **the need for us to integrate in nature; the need for us to sensitively go up to new heights.**

INTEGRAL offers certitude.

...

INTEGRAL **without the protection of major and minor officials** reduces to the same denominator the vital, artistic **standards.** Freed from intellectual mediocrity, we are cutting our way forward over the dead bodies of schools and individuals.

INTEGRAL **claims the essence of the primary expression.**



**C**itiți

ARTĂ E UN CASTRAVETE  
TOȚI ARTIȘTII SINT CASTRAȚI  
MIGUEL DONVILLE

no 10

PROECTIL  
MODERNIST **unu**

**PE FRONT**

ilarie voronca  
claude sernet  
stephane roll  
sașa pană  
moldov  
al. marius  
f. lumbroso  
george bogza

**D** m. h. maxy  
**E**  
**S** marc chagall  
**E**  
**N**  
**E** victor brauner

**VESTIAR**

BIBLIOGRAFIE - CALENDAR - DELICTE - CATAPULT - **unu** LA TRIBUNAL

1929 FEBRUARIE

LEI 3

FIGURE 13.6

*Unu*, no. 10, February 1929.

*Tradition: **The intelligence of the people, escaped from the eternally natural pastiche—and technology.** The collective imagination has forged fairy tales, songs, cultures that will for ever be viable!*

*WE: **Synthesize the will life has always had, everywhere, and the efforts of all modern experiments. Immersed in collectivity, we create its style according to the instincts it only surmises.***

*The deaf, again, haven't heard us.*

*The audacious have joined us!<sup>59</sup>*

If the manifesto of the Italian futurist painters of 1910 had urged the dead, the academicians, and the “mummies” deep in the bowels of the earth to get out of way, *Integral* apparently wished to evoke the fantasy that the young and the bold had already joined the new movement, perhaps even the futurists themselves.

*Integral* directed itself directly toward “dead” figurative and imitative art and literature by celebrating explicitly “the objective representation of our pure spirit” independent of both reality as a source of inspiration and psychology or emotions. Thanks to—or perhaps due to—the general ambition of encompassing as much as possible of modern art and literature so as to evoke the awaited synthesis, *Integral* was filled with everything from postsymbolist poems and short pieces of lyrical prose to pure dadaist effusions, futurist-inspired collages, and semi-surrealist dream visions, while the visual material consisted of everything from nonfigurative linocuts, reproductions of constructivist compositions, and futurist settings to abstract portraits and sculptures; works by Marcel Iancu, Victor Brauner, Max Herman Maxy, Hans Mattis-Teutsch, Corneliu Michailescu, and Gheorghe Petrașcu along with works by international avant-gardists, Russian, Dutch, French, German, Czech, and Hungarian modernists.

If *Integral*, irrigating the Romanian avant-garde with new impulses and ideas parallel to *Contimporanul*, was characterized by a blessed mixture of everything possible and impossible at the same time, this mixture neutralized its own object in a way since the journal never succeeded in gathering its troops under one banner but allowed the individual artists and writers to confront each other. Despite Voronca's resistance, the effect was that surrealism slowly but irrevocably occupied more and more space. The resistance was broken three years later, with most of the editorial staff, among

them Voronca himself, going over to Sașa Pană's new monthly review *Unu*, which would last up to 1933.<sup>60</sup> At the same time Voronca, for instance, contributed also to the poet Geo Bogza's journal *Urmuz*, whose name Bogza took from the pseudonym of Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău, already "world-famous" in Bucharest, and which he started in January 1928, only a few months before *Integral* was discontinued and the inaugural issue of *Unu* was published.<sup>61</sup>

According to Valentin Mișăescu, the Romanian variant of constructivism faced its own death and was replaced by surrealism more or less as a consequence of the efforts, so obviously manifested in poetry, to liberate the sentence from the canons of logic.<sup>62</sup> The by no means negligible influence of futurism worked in the same direction and enriched the poetic vocabulary with a wealth of technical terms, at the same time as the writers' wish to keep up to date placed poetry definitively "under the sign of the city," thus continuing the work of the symbolists. Thus, the mechanical processing of certain methods of construction resulted in a clear-cut separation between expression and substance, a separation that was noted, for instance, by Ion Vinea, in fact the animator of the movement, who said that the true revolution is the revolution of sensitivity instead of only "a revolution of the word stock," a revolution concerning only the technical aspects of language. According to Mișăescu, it was precisely such a revolution of sensitivity that the Romanian surrealists gathered round *Unu* undertook to achieve.

Remarkable also is the fact that both *Urmuz* and *Unu* were first published in the provinces before both moved to "little Paris," namely in Cîmpina not far south of Brașov and in Dorohoi in northern Moldavia not far from the border of Ukraine, respectively. When it came to *Urmuz*, the great prototype and inspiration for the Romanian avant-gardists was of course the absurdist who had been working at the court of appeal in Bucharest and whom Geo Bogza compared to God or Jesus, calling him "He" and "Him," the writer caught up by time. Bogza declared in his leading article in the inaugural issue of his journal that, although *Urmuz* seems to be an absurd dream in times of totally mercantile preoccupations and although one may be ashamed of one's former close friendship with the madman, "whose destiny was to be swallowed by the dark of the moment that followed his death," he is still alive and very much present as a whiplash flogging the consciousness.<sup>63</sup> Among those contributing to *Urmuz*, published between January and July 1928, we find not only

Ilarie Voronca and Stephan Roll but also Tristan Tzara, who was sending a few poems from Paris. Geo Bogza himself, the enfant terrible of the Romanian avant-garde who also contributed to *Unu*, wrote “psychogrammatical” texts, a mixture of journalistic reports, prose poems, and sensitive poetry attacking especially bourgeois sexual morality and its institutions: in their capacity as unheard-of provocations of public morality, both the collection called *Jurnal de sex*, published in 1929, and the collection called *Poemul invectivă*, published in 1933, were placed on the black list at the same time as the poet was arrested and prosecuted for offending public values.

The manifesto that Sașa Pană, the major apologist of surrealism in Romania, published in *Unu* in April 1928 is, despite the editor’s interest in surrealism, the most dadaist of all manifestos of the Romanian avant-garde, at the same time as it celebrates both futurism, surrealism, and all the main domestic precursors, including 75HP, Brâncuși, Tudor Arghezi, Ion Vinea, and Tristan Tzara of course:

“readers, disinfect your brains!”

a cry in the tympan

aircraft

wireless—radio

television

76 h.p.

marinetti

breton

vinea

tzara

ribemont-dessaignes

arghezi

brancusi

theo van doesburg

hurraaaaay hurraaaaaay

hurraaaaaaaaay

burn the pulp of the libraries

a. et p. Chr. n.

123456789000,000,000,000,000 kg.

or *fatten rats*

*scribes*

*transfer pictures*

*sterility*

*amanita muscaria*

*elftimichalisms*

*brontosaurus*

*booooooooooooooooooooo*

*combine verb*

*abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz*

*= art rhythm speed granite*

*revive gutenber*<sup>64</sup>

The manifesto is obviously full of contradictions and at the same time revealing in regard to the Romanian avant-garde and its need for historical legitimacy: at the same time as it urges the avant-gardists to “burn the pulp of the libraries,” it pays homage to several established authors in the same way as, for instance, Benjamin Fundoianu defined Mallarmé in 1922 as belonging to the prehistory of the avant-garde or Ilarie Voronca in 1924 praised the forerunners of the Romanian avant-garde, among them Tudor Arghezi, Ion Minulescu, Adrian Maniu, and Urmuz.<sup>65</sup> Two years later Geo Bogza, in *Unu*, would appreciatively refer to Lautréamont, Alfred Jarry, Rimbaud, Dostoevsky, Gide, and Nietzsche, while Stephan Roll equally appreciatively pointed at not only Lautréamont and Rimbaud but also Baudelaire and “2 or 3 others.”<sup>66</sup> Also characteristic of the Romanian avant-garde is the fact that the avant-gardists never attacked or even questioned the cult of the “national poet,” Eminescu, who represented the Poet to such a degree that any attack against him seemed unthinkable, an absurd violation of the very principle of Poetry.<sup>67</sup>

Published monthly up to December 1932, *Unu* would count among its contributors such writers and artists as Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Fundoianu, Ilarie Voronca, Ion Vinea, Stephan Roll, Sandu Eliade, Mihail Dan, Virgil Gheorghiu, Geo Bogza, and of course Victor Brauner, the artist who became Romania’s major surrealist with more

or less absurd or grotesque visual descriptions of the world beyond conventional acknowledgment, many of which would revolve around the eye and the problem of seeing, even before the artist lost his left eye in a fight in Oscar Domínguez's studio in Paris in 1938.<sup>68</sup> The surrealists around *Unu* were no longer particularly interested in urbanity, nor were they influenced by futurism or dadaism, but rather were interested in dreams and the dream work, in freeing man from his self-made bonds, logic, and rationality, in dissecting the dreams and setting fantasy free: poetry and automatic writing signaled freedom and the possibility of transcending the contradictions between dreams and reality.

Besides running a publishing company of its own, *Unu* succeeded in engaging a great number of Western European artists and writers, among them Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Theo van Doesburg, Robert Desnos, Pierre Reverdy, and Marc Chagall. After devoting a whole issue to "Urmuz—the forerunner," the magazine published its last issue, the so-called white one, which was completed by a "notice of termination of the contract"—"To keep the journal young and fresh, we kill it today." At that time, writers and artists such as Geo Bogza, Paul Păun, Gherasim Luca, and Jules Perahim had already urged the intellectuals to fight for the millions of people living in misery affected by political injustice and to depict and describe "the violent tragedy of our times." The arts must be done for "all people, thousands of them." The manifesto "Poezia agresive," written in 1931 by Paul Sterian and itself a literarily and typographically exceptionally bold mixture of titles, telegram texts, news items, and agitprop slogans, claimed that the "true poet" must have a "thousand eyes, a thousand ears, a thousand feet, a thousand telegrams, a thousand pencils, a thousand expressions, a thousand pistols"—the poet must be aggressive, go out in society and demand his rights.<sup>69</sup>

However, going out in society and demanding one's rights in the matter of, for instance, the minorities would be more and more difficult as the radical right-wing forces of both the intellectual and political establishment got stronger and stronger, especially after the founding of the anti-Semitic and fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael in Iași in 1927 and its political section called the Iron Guard under the leadership of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu; the Legion was an extreme right-wing movement based on Romanian tradition, Orthodox mysticism, and anti-Semitism through which

Codreanu sought the spiritual and moral rejuvenation of Romania. But still in 1930 Aurel Baranga, for instance, was courageous enough to start the strongly surrealist journal *Alge*,<sup>70</sup> which was to become the last “real” mouthpiece of the Romanian avant-garde besides the less influential but (in the circumstances) unusually long-lived literary magazine *Meridian*, published in Craiova between 1934 and 1936 and between 1941 and 1945. *Alge*, whose inaugural issue was published in September 1930 and its last ten months later, counted among its contributors almost the same writers and artists who contributed to *Unu* as well, among them Hans Mattis-Teutsch, Gherasim Luca, and Paul Păun, creating a sort of “dadaist” or “surrealist” atmosphere favoring more or less absurd puns and provocative, violent gestures; the Christmas issue of 1930 consisted of totally blank pages with the exception of the information that the Christmas issue wouldn’t be published because of the holiday.

The same persons responsible for *Alge*—Aurel Baranga, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, and Jules Perahim—were brought to the Văcărești prison and had to sit behind bars for some time in 1931 on the initiative of the minister of the interior himself by order of the premier Nicolae Iorga, who had personally received one of the total of thirteen copies of a newly started journal, published on 1 October, with the dedication: “Do you have something like this? No, you don’t.” The provocation was unprecedented—the premier had received a copy of the magazine that “everybody” talked of called *Pula*—*revista de pula modernă*, which may be translated as “The Cock—the Magazine of the Modern Cock,” entirely dedicated to the male sexual organ, richly illustrated as well.<sup>71</sup> The journal was of course a pubertal joke from the boys from *Alge* but maybe also a pseudo-dadaist, naive way of showing that the avant-garde was still going strong and had courage enough to provoke and protest against the political establishment, which Paul Păun’s poem also suggests, though the rest of the content of the journal doesn’t show that it was anything more than a childish joke:

*The nameless street, or house no. 4*  
*Seven cocks of humpbacks*  
*seven cocks of goitrous patients*  
*wide*  
*have fallen down to the ground, since they were badly dressed.*  
*Alas! You magnates!*

*well dressed  
be men  
don't be nervous  
don't be agitated  
because you are shit.*<sup>72</sup>

Around the mid-1930s and particularly at the end of the decade, the political situation became more and more aggravated month by month, even day by day. Although Marcel Iancu and his family were spared the persecutions of the Romanian National Socialists for quite a long time, his daughter Josine-Cécile was expelled from the Catholic boarding school in Bucharest as early as 1935 only because her father was a Jew: “Overnight I became a killer of Jesus Christ,” she explained much later.<sup>73</sup> Sometime in the 1930s Marcel Iancu delivered a public lecture in Bucharest called “Jewish confession about art” (“Mărturii judaice despre artă”) in which he declared that he himself had never hidden his Jewish origin but that he made a clear distinction between “Jewish artists” and artists who were Jews; he counted himself among the latter group of artists, including among others Marc Chagall.<sup>74</sup>

With the Jewish presence so visible in the mass media and in Romanian cultural life in general in the interwar period, the anti-Semitic forces mobilized themselves on the basis of the imagined fear of Romanian culture being “Judaized.”<sup>75</sup> For instance, the literary critic Nicolae Roșu tried with the help of “scientific” arguments to put a stop to “Jewish modernism,” declaring that the fight against it would be victorious only by “strong ethnic moves,” at the same time as Nicolae Iorga attacked “pornographic” literature of Jewish origin. According to the poet Radu Gyr, avant-gardist literature had developed solely in terms of a detrimental Jewish influence; indeed modernism as such was a proof that authentic Romanian culture was being Judaized, which threatened to replace the genuine and original “Romanian thought” with attitudes and ideas totally foreign to it, “monstrous” attitudes opposed to the true interests of Romania. According to Gyr, there was only one solution, to eliminate the Jews from Romanian culture, for instance by forbidding them to write in Romanian. The fact that a large part of the cultural elite signed such demands was not only a result of the rapid political developments, but must be seen also in the light of



the ethno-nationalist foundation on which official culture was built and found its legitimacy.

After extensive disturbances within the political establishment and out in the country, the right-wing fascist movement in coalition with the National Peasant Party and supported by several intellectuals, among them Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Nae Ionescu, and Constantin Noica, succeeded in getting more than 15 percent of the votes in the general elections of 1937, whereupon King Carol II, considering Codreanu an obvious threat to the monarchy even while he himself supported the anti-Semitic right-wing movements, commissioned the leader of the National Christian Party, Octavian Goga, to form a government in cooperation with the country's leading anti-Semite A. C. Cuza, despite the fact that the party had received only 9 percent of the votes. The government began immediately to apply several anti-Semitic laws at the same time as measures were taken against Codreanu and the Iron Guard. After a little more than a month the king, dreaming of playing the role of a popular leader on the fascist model, seized the opportunity, dissolved the parliament, proclaimed a new antidemocratic constitution in February 1938, and established a royal dictatorship, a totalitarian system without political legitimacy that abolished all political parties and associations in the country. As a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in August 1939 Romania soon received an ultimatum from the Soviet Union demanding the immediate cession of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, which led to King Carol's abdication in favor of his son Michael I. In September 1940 Romania was proclaimed a "National Legionary State" by the king; general Ion Antonescu was designated as head of state, *conducatorul*, in practice a dictator supported by the legionaries and in close cooperation with the Nazi regime in Germany.<sup>76</sup>

In the autumn of 1938 Marcel Iancu had traveled to Palestine to sound out the possibilities of emigration.<sup>77</sup> Even after his brother Iuliu and his family had left Romania, Marcel Iancu had civil courage enough to appear in public with his last big exhibition in his native country, in Bucharest in May 1939, together with Milița Petrașcu, only a few months before Romanian legislation was partly adapted to the Nuremberg laws, giving the authorities the right, for instance, to confiscate the country estate Jacquesmara, which Iancu owned together with the Costin family.

Marcel Iancu tried apparently, for some reason, to hold on as long as possible, but was forced to make the final decision to leave after the pogroms organized by the Iron Guard on 21 and 22 January 1941, according to some reports trying to get rid of Antonescu in cooperation with the German SS and the Gestapo,<sup>78</sup> who had already installed themselves in the capital and who, according to Iancu's autobiographical remarks written shortly after,<sup>79</sup> were even impressed at the sight of the Iron Guard going berserk in the Jewish quarters. According to Iancu, searches and interrogations had been going on for several weeks before the pogrom, always ending in violence, beating, looting, and theft of large sums of money as ransom for prisoners. A common slogan was that the Romanians had gone to war against the internal enemy, i.e., the covenant between the Jews and the Freemasons. Organized in large gangs and well armed, the legionaries launched their onslaught on Monday at nightfall against areas populated mainly by a majority of Jews, setting fire to the synagogues, spreading destruction, loading entire stocks of shops onto trucks, and setting houses on fire. They burned the furniture in the streets and plundered everything that stood in their way like hordes of barbarians and vandals, Iancu writes. On Tuesday night scores of Jews were forced out of their homes, just as they were, hardly dressed, and were taken for interrogation; these were people who were still in their houses, men and youths who had not managed to find refuge in time with Christian residents—the lucky ones were not handed over by the latter to the authorities, while the majority were led off and packed into corridors and synagogues, then loaded in groups of thirty or forty onto trucks taken to the Jilava forest, where they were either shot or simply beaten to death. After forced removal of the men from their homes came the turn of the special gangs of looters plundering all the furniture and other possessions; objects that the looters had no use for were tossed out of the windows and later burned in the streets. According to Iancu, the primary victims of the pogrom were the men found in the synagogue that Tuesday night, while whole families were driven to the forest to be shot. Rabbi Gutman, who was betrayed by the priest of that quarter, was forced to watch as his only two sons were shot to death before his eyes, simply because they resisted the removal of their father from his home; he himself survived because the gunshot didn't kill him. Tongues were cut out, eyes gouged, fingers and hands severed, skin flayed while the victims were still alive. Bodies were hung on

hooks in the abattoir and the word “Kosher” was scrawled on them, bodies with stab wounds in various places, decapitated trunks, limbs torn out.

One of those killed and found hanging on a hook in the slaughterhouse was Marcel Iancu’s brother-in-law Michael Goldschlager-Costin. In November his brother Jacques Costin was deported together with his wife Laura Costin to the Jewish ghetto in the Ukrainian town of Moghilev-Podolsk in Trans-Dniestria.

Little more than one week after the pogroms in Bucharest, Marcel and Clara Iancu emigrated together with their daughters Josine-Cécile and Deborah Theodora Iancu. In the harbor of Constanța they succeeded in getting on board a ship going to Istanbul, where they arrived on 4 February. On 8 February they arrived in the town of Islahiye at the Syrian border, passed the border control in Meidam Ekbes, traveled further through Armenia, Iraq, and Transjordan, arriving in Tel Aviv on 23 February 1941.

## SELECTED CHRONOLOGY

- 1852  
Ion Luca Caragiale is born in Haimanale.
- 1859  
The principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia are united under Prince Alexandru Ion Cuza.
- 1861  
Israel Aksentfeld publishes *dass schterentichel*.  
Salomon Ettinger's comedy *sserkele* is published posthumously.
- 1862  
The first parliament is opened and Bucharest becomes the capital of the country.
- 1866  
Prince Alexandru Ion Cuza abdicates and Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen is elected ruling prince of Romania as Carol I. A new constitution is adopted.
- 1869  
Isaak Joel Linecki's novel *doss pojilische jingel* is published in the journal *kol mevasser*.  
Mendele Mojcher Ssforim publishes the dramatic play *di takse* and the novel *fischke der krumer*.
- 1873  
Ion Luca Caragiale makes his debut in the weekly magazine *Ghimpele*.
- 1875  
Aron Sigalu is born in Iași on 13 June.
- 1876  
Avram Goldfaden starts the first Jewish theater in Iași and publishes the comedy *schmendrik*.
- 1877  
Ion Luca Caragiale publishes the journal *Claponul* and, together with Frédéric Damé, the journal *Națiunea română*.  
The deputies declare war on the Ottoman Empire and proclaim the national independence of Romania. Romania participates in the Russo-Turkish War.

- **1878**  
Mendele Mojcher Ssforim publishes the novel *massojess binjomin haschlischi*.  
Treaty of San Stefano ending the Russo-Turkish War. Dobruja is awarded to Romania. Romania participates in the Congress of Berlin.
- **1879**  
Ion Luca Caragiale's play *O noapte furtunoasă* is performed at the National Theater in Bucharest.
- **1880**  
The independence of Romania is officially recognized by Germany, Great Britain, and France.
- **1881**  
Parliament approves the transformation of Romania into a kingdom, and Carol I is crowned king of Romania.
- **1883**  
Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău (Urmuz) is born in Curtea de Argeș.  
Avram Goldfaden publishes the comedy *schulamit*.
- **1884**  
Ion Luca Caragiale's play *O scrisoare pierdută* is performed at the National Theater in Bucharest and Caragiale himself is appointed director of the theater, also performing his musical comedy *Hatmanul Baltag*.
- **1887**  
Aron Sigalu is sent to the boarding school in Iași; later he starts a socialist club in Botoșani together with, among others, Alexandru Tzaran and Petru Musoi.  
Avram Goldfaden publishes the comedy *barkochba*.
- **1888**  
Sholem Aleichem starts the yearbook *di jiddische folksbibliotek* with the novel *stempenju*.
- **1889**  
Ion Luca Caragiale publishes the story "O făclie de Paște."
- **1890**  
Ion Luca Caragiale's play *Năpasta* is performed at the National Theater in Bucharest.
- **1892**  
Aron Sigalu is sent to Berlin following a family and political scandal. Alexandru Macedonski publishes the first "manifesto" of Romanian symbolism, the essay "Poezia viitorului," in his own journal *Literatorul*.

— 1893

Ion Luca Caragiale and Anton Bacalbaşa start the journal *Moftul român*.

— 1894

Mordechaj Sspektor publishes the story *der jiddischer muschik*.

— 1895

Marcel Iancu is born on 24 May in Bucharest.

Arthur Segal exhibits in Bucharest and travels to Paris to study at the Académie Julienne.

Alexandru Macedonski contributes for the first time to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's journal *Poesia*.

— 1896

Samuel Rosenstock is born on 16 April in Moineşti.

Iuliu Iancu is born in Bucharest.

Arthur Segal moves to Munich.

— 1899

George Iancu is born in Bucharest.

George Bacovia makes his debut in the journal *Literatorul*.

— 1901

Ion Luca Caragiale publishes his collection of texts *Momente*.

— 1902

Samuel Rosenstock begins to attend the "Israelite" school in Moineşti (through 1906).

— 1903

Arthur Segal exhibits at the Kunstverein in Munich.

— 1904

Arthur Segal moves to Berlin and marries Ernestine Charas.

— 1906

Alexandru Macedonski publishes the novel *Le Calvaire de feu* in French in Paris.

— 1907

Arthur Segal exhibits at the Berlin Secession.

Peasant rebellion, started in Moldavia, spreads throughout the country and is violently suppressed by the army; about 10,000 dead.

## — 1908

Marcel Iancu begins at the Gheorghe Sincai primary school in Bucharest and attends private lectures in drawing and painting by Iosif Iser.

The circle of Macedonski starts the journal *Revista celorlalți*.

Ion Minulescu publishes the collection of poems *Romanțe pentru mai târziu*.

## — 1909

The newspaper *Democrația* in Craiova publishes Marinetti's first futurist manifesto on 20 February, the same day as it is published in *Le Figaro* in Paris. A few days later it is also published in the journal *Biblioteca modernă* in Bucharest.

Iosif Iser organizes an international art exhibition in Bucharest, including André Derain.

Arthur Segal exhibits at the Berlin Secession.

Avram Goldfaden's collection of poems, songs, and short stories *pintele jid* is published posthumously.

## — 1910

Arthur Segal participates in the foundation of the new secession in Berlin and has his first one-man exhibition in Bucharest.

## — 1911

Le Corbusier visits Bucharest.

Arthur Segal exhibits at the new secession in Berlin and in both Mannheim and Nuremberg.

*Biblioteca modernă* publishes the manifesto of the futurist dramatists.

## — 1912

Marcel Iancu begins at the Gheorghe Lazăr upper secondary school in Bucharest while Samuel Rosenstock begins at Mihai Viteazul upper secondary school in Bucharest.

Samuel Rosenstock, Marcel Iancu, Ion Vinea, and friends publish the journal *Simbolul* (through 1913) with contributions by, among others, Adrian Maniu, Ion Lovinescu, and Alexandru Macedonski.

Arthur Segal contributes to Franz Pfemfert's journal *Die Aktion* and exhibits in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Karlsruhe, Konstanz, Basel, and Leipzig.

Adrian Maniu publishes *Figuri de ceara*.

The journal *Fronța* is published in Iași.

Béla Bartók visits Bucharest.

— 1913

Arthur Segal exhibits in Budapest, Stuttgart, Berlin, Munich, Mannheim, Hamburg, Münster, and Karlsruhe.

Constantin Brâncuși exhibits in Bucharest.

Ion Minulescu publishes the collection of poems *De vorbă cu mine însumi*.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch exhibits at the autumn salon of Der Sturm in Budapest.

Béla Bartók's *Cântece populare românești din comitatul Bihor* is published by the Romanian Academy.

Romania enters the Second Balkan War and crosses the border into Bulgaria.

— 1914

Marcel and Iuliu Iancu move to Zurich and enter the University of Zurich.

Arthur Segal exhibits in Mannheim, Bremen, Berlin, Tokyo, Chemnitz, Leipzig, Dresden, and Cologne and moves with his family to Ascona, Switzerland.

Constantin Brâncuși exhibits in Bucharest.

King Carol I dies and Ferdinand I becomes king of Romania.

— 1915

Samuel Rosenstock and Ion Vinea publish the journal *Chemarea*. Rosenstock uses his pseudonym Tristan Tzara for the first time.

Samuel Rosenstock contributes to the journal *Nouă revista română*.

Tudor Arghezi starts the journal *Cronica*.

Marcel Janco enters the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zurich.

George Iancu joins his brothers in Zurich.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch exhibits his first abstract paintings.

Béla Bartók publishes *Jocuri populare românești*, *Colinde românești*, and *Sonatina*.

— 1916

Tristan Tzara, the Janco brothers, and Arthur Segal participate in the opening of Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich and take part in many of its activities.

Tristan Tzara reads his first Dada manifesto, publishes *La première aventure céleste de M. Antipyrine* with illustrations by Marcel Janco, and contributes, like Janco, to the anthology *Cabaret Voltaire*.

Marcel Janco shows his first masks and costumes and participates together with Tzara in several soirées and evenings at the Meierei and Zunfthaus zur Waag in Zurich.

George Bacovia publishes the collection of poems *Plumb*.

George Enescu performs *Carillon nocturne*.

The treaty of alliance is signed in Bucharest between Romania and the Entente Powers.



## — 1917

Tristan Tzara and the Janco brothers take part in the opening of the Galerie Dada in Zurich and participate in several soirées and evenings.

Marcel Janco is responsible for the stage setting of Oskar Kokoschka's play *Sphinx und Strohmann*, in which Tristan Tzara participates as well, and exhibits at Kunstsalon Wolfsberg in Zurich along with Arthur Segal.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch joins the Ma group and has his first one-man exhibition in Budapest with catalogue text by Lajos Kassák.

## — 1918

Tristan Tzara reads his second Dada manifesto, publishes the collection of poems *Vingt-cinq-et-un poèmes*, and contributes to several Dada publications and activities.

Marcel Janco joins the group Das Neue Leben and delivers two lectures at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule.

Arthur Segal exhibits in Zurich and Winterthur.

Benjamin Fundoianu publishes *Tagaduința lui Petru*.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch joins Der Sturm, has a one-man exhibition in Berlin, and exhibits in Budapest and Brașov.

Max Herman Maxy has his first one-man exhibition in Iași.

The Treaty of Bucharest is signed between Romania and the Central Powers. King Ferdinand declares war on the Central Powers, marking Romania's reentry into World War I. The Grand National Assembly at Alba Iulia votes for the union of all the Romanian territories in the former lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with the Kingdom of Romania.

## — 1919

Marcel Janco writes the manifesto of Die Radikale Künstler, exhibits at Kunstgewerbe Museum in Zurich, and travels together with Jules Janco to Paris, where he meets with Lily Ackermann.

Arthur Segal exhibits in Zurich and Budapest. He and Ernestine Segal return to Berlin.

Romania signs the peace treaties concluded at Saint-Germain-en-Laye and Neuilly-sur-Seine.

## — 1920

Tristan Tzara moves to Paris to join the circle of André Breton.

Marcel and Jules Janco move to Béthune in northern France; Marcel Janco works together with the architect Louis Déquire and marries Lily Ackermann.

Max Herman Maxy exhibits in Bucharest, like Hans Mattis-Teutsch and Constantin Brâncuși.

The Romanian Association of Composers is founded under the leadership of George Enescu, who finishes *Cvartetul I*, op. 22, no. 1.

— 1921

Marcel and Jules Janco return to Bucharest.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch has a one-man exhibition at the Sturm gallery in Berlin and in Braşov.

Max Herman Maxy has his first one-man exhibition in Bucharest.

George Enescu's *Oedip* is performed in Paris and Lausanne.

— 1922

Marcel and Iuliu Iancu open their architectural office and plan their first buildings in Bucharest.

Marcel Iancu exhibits at Sala Maison d'Art in Bucharest.

Marcel Iancu and Ion Vinea start the journal *Contimporanul* (through 1932) with contributions by, among others, Ilarie Voronca, Victor Brauner, Benjamin Fundoianu, Max Herman Maxy, Hans Mattis-Teutsch, and numerous international writers and artists.

The journal *Cugetul românesc* publishes three “weird pages” by Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău under the pseudonym of Urmuz.

Benjamin Fundoianu and Sandu Eliade start the experimental theater Insula in Bucharest;

Fundoianu publishes *Imagini și carti din Franța*.

Max Herman Maxy travels to Berlin to study with Arthur Segal.

Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* is performed in Bucharest.

King Ferdinand I is crowned as king of Greater Romania in Alba Iulia.

— 1923

Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău commits suicide in the center of Bucharest.

Benjamin Fundoianu moves to Paris.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch has one-man exhibitions in Rome, Berlin, and Chicago.

Max Herman Maxy has a one-man exhibition in the Sturm gallery in Berlin, participates in an exhibition organized by the November Group in Berlin, and exhibits at Casa Artelor in Bucharest.

Maurice Ravel's *La valse* is performed in Bucharest.

A new constitution proclaims Romania a unitary and indivisible national state.

— 1924

Ion Vinea's activist manifesto to the youth—“Manifest activist către tinerime”—is published in *Contimporanul*, which also organizes its first big international exhibition in Bucharest with artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, Lajos Kassák, Constantin Brâncuși, Marcel Iancu, Hans Mattis-Teutsch, and Arthur Segal.

Ilarie Voronca publishes the journal *75HP* with contributions by, for instance, Victor Brauner and Stephan Roll.

Scarlat Callimachi starts the journal *Punct* (through 1925) with contributions by, for instance, Victor Brauner, Ion Vinea, and Ilarie Voronca.

Max Herman Maxy, Victor Brauner, and Corneliu Michăilescu start the “studio of constructivist art” in Bucharest.

Victor Brauner has a one-man exhibition in Bucharest while Hans Mattis-Teutsch exhibits in Belgrade.

George Enescu performs *Sonata pentru pian în fa diez minor*, op. 24, in Bucharest.

Béla Bartók is elected member of the Romanian Association of Composers during his second visit in Bucharest.

#### — 1925

Max Herman Maxy starts the journal *Integral* (through 1928) with contributions by, for instance, F. Brunea-Fox, Ilarie Voronca, Benjamin Fondane, and Hans Mattis-Teutsch.

The “studio of constructivist art” is responsible for stage settings and costumes for André Gide’s play *Saul* and for I. L. Peretz’s play *Bay nacht oyfn altn mark* in Vilnius.

Victor Brauner visits Paris, where Hans Mattis-Teutsch has a one-man exhibition.

Igor Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* (*Pasărea de foc*) is performed in Bucharest.

Prince Carol renounces his right to the throne in favor of his son Michael and goes into exile.

#### — 1926

Marcel Iancu travels to France, Germany, and Switzerland, is in touch with, among others, Constantin Brâncuși, André Breton, Robert Delaunay, Philippe Soupault, Hans Arp, Max Ernst, Paul Eluard, and Jean Cocteau, and exhibits together with Milița Petrașcu in Bucharest.

Max Herman Maxy is responsible for the stage setting and costumes for I. L. Peretz’s play *Manechinul sentimental* in Vilnius.

George Enescu performs in Philadelphia.

The first jazz band is formed in Romania, called the Hot Chaps.

#### — 1927

Marcel Iancu exhibits in Bucharest together with Milița Petrașcu and Al Brătasianu.

Ilarie Voronca publishes the collection of poems *Colomba*.

Constantin Brâncuși exhibits in Bucharest.

Max Herman Maxy has a one-man exhibition in Bucharest and exhibits together with Marcel Iancu drawings, sketches, and models for the theater.

The Legion of the Archangel Michael, led by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, is founded in Iași. The death of King Ferdinand I; the first reign of King Michael I; as he is only six years old, a Regency Council rules in his name.

#### — 1928

Sașa Pană starts the journal *Unu* (1928–1932, 1933) with contributions by, for instance, Geo Bogza, Victor Brauner, Mihail Cosma, and Ilarie Voronca.

Geo Bogza publishes the journal *Urmuz* with contributions by, for instance, Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca, and Stephan Roll.

Benjamin Fondane publishes the collection of poems *Trois scénarios; ciné-poèmes* in Paris.

Ilie Voronca publishes the collection of poems *Ulise*.

Constantin Brâncuși exhibits in Bucharest.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch exhibits in Berlin.

#### — 1929

Marcel Iancu takes part in *Contimporanul*'s exhibition "Arta nouă" in Bucharest together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy, Victor Brauner, Milița Petrașcu, and Hans Mattis-Teutsch.

Geo Bogza publishes the collection of poems *Jurnal de sex*.

Ilie Voronca publishes the collection of poems *Plante și animale* with illustrations by Constantin Brâncuși.

Stephan Roll publishes the collection of poems *Poeme în aer liber* with illustrations by Victor Brauner.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch has one-man exhibitions in Cluj, Bucharest, and Budapest.

#### — 1930

Marcel Iancu divorces Lily Ackermann and marries Clara Goldschlager; Iancu takes part in the journal *Facla*'s modernist exhibition in Bucharest together with, among others, Victor Brauner, Max Herman Maxy, and Milița Petrașcu, as well as in *Contimporanul*'s second group exhibition together with, among others, Milița Petrașcu, Irina Codreanu, and Merica Râmniceanu in Paris and The Hague. At the same time he illustrates Ion Vinea's collection of poems *Paradisul suspinelor* and Ion Barbu's *Joc secund*.

Sașa Pană publishes *Urmuz*'s weird pages titled *Algazy & Grummer*.

Aurel Baranga publishes the journal *Alge* (in 1933 as well) with contributions by, among others, Paul Păun and Gherasim Luca.

Benjamin Fondane publishes the collection of poems *Privești panoramas*.

Stephan Roll publishes the collection of poems *Moartea vie a Eleonorei* with illustrations by Victor Brauner.

Sașa Pană publishes the collection of poems *Diagrame* with illustrations by Victor Brauner.

Ilarie Voronca publishes the collections *Brataranoptilor*, *A doua lumina*, and *Zodiac*.

Victor Brauner moves to Paris.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch has a one-man exhibition in Brașov.

Horia Creangă plans the ARO building on Bulevardul Magheru in Bucharest.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti visits Bucharest.

Igor Stravinsky conducts the philharmonic orchestra in Bucharest.

Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen returns to the country clandestinely and is proclaimed king of Romania under the name of Carol II.

### — 1931

Marcel Iancu plans Villa Wechsler and Villa Juster in Bucharest and illustrates Jacques Costin's collection of poems *Don Quiote*; he also publishes *Exerciții pentru mâna dreaptă*, including drawings by Milița Petrașcu.

Aurel Baranga, Gherasim Luca, and friends publish the journal *Pula*.

Sașa Pană publishes the collection of poems *Exhinox arbitrar* with illustrations by Max Herman Maxy.

Ilarie Voronca publishes the collection of poems *Invitație a bal*.

### — 1932

Marcel Iancu takes part in the Arta Nouă exhibition in Bucharest together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, Margareta Sterian, and Claudia Millian and exhibits together with Milița Petrașcu in the Mozart hall in Bucharest.

Ilarie Voronca publishes *Peter Schlemihl* with illustrations by Jules Perahim.

Sașa Pană publishes *Viața romanțată a lui Dumnezeu*.

Victor Brauner joins the surrealists in Paris and participates in Salon des Surindépendants.

Maurice Ravel conducts the philharmonic orchestra in Bucharest.

### — 1933

Marcel Iancu takes part in the exhibition organized by Grupul Plastici Criterion in Bucharest together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, and Paul Sterian and is invited by Marinetti to take part in the futurist world's fair in Rome together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy, Milița Petrașcu, and Paul Sterian. Iancu also illustrates Sașa Pană's collection of poems *Cuvîntul talisman*.

Geo Bogza publishes the collection of poems *Poemul invectivă* and takes part in the publishing of the journal *Viața imediată*.

Hans Mattis-Teutsch has one-man exhibitions in Brașov and Cluj.

#### — 1934

Marcel Iancu plans the sanatorium of Predeal, takes part in the exhibition organized by Grupul Plastic 1934 in Bucharest together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy and Paul Sterian, and exhibits in Bucharest together with Milița Petrașcu.

Sașa Pană publishes Tristan Tzara's *Primele poeme*.

Tiberiu Iliescu starts the journal *Meridian* (1934–1936, 1941–1945) in Craiova with contributions by, for instance, Geo Bogza and Sașa Pană.

Eugène Ionesco publishes *Nu*.

Ilarie Voronca publishes the collection of poems *Patmos* with illustrations by Victor Brauner.

Victor Brauner has a one-man exhibition in Paris; text in the catalogue by André Breton.

Béla Bartók delivers a lecture in Bucharest.

#### — 1935

Marcel Iancu takes part in *Contimporanul*'s third exhibition in Bucharest together with, among others, Giorgio de Chirico, plans the Bazaltin and Frida Cohen houses in Bucharest, and publishes the essay "Utopia Bucureștilor" in *Către o arhitectură a Bucureștilor*.

#### — 1936

Marcel Iancu plans the Villa Reich in Bucharest, takes part in *Contimporanul*'s fourth exhibition in Bucharest together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy and Paul Sterian, and illustrates Sașa Pană's *Sadismul adevărului* together with, among others, Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, and Victor Brauner.

Victor Brauner participates in the international surrealist exhibition in New York.

George Enescu performs *Oedip* in Paris.

#### — 1937

Marcel Iancu has a one-man exhibition in Bucharest, plans Villa Hassner in Bucharest, and takes part in an exhibition in Paris together with, among others, Max Herman Maxy and Milița Petrașcu.

Gheorghe Tătărescu's government is forced to resign as a result of the general elections in which right-wing parties and the fascists obtain a majority. Carol II designates Octavian Goga and the anti-Semitic National Christian Party to form a government.

## — 1938

Marcel Iancu visits Palestine planning to emigrate.

Constantin Brâncuși's monument in memory of the soldiers who died during World War I is inaugurated in Târgu Jiu, containing *The Gate of the Kiss*, *The Table of Silence*, and *The Endless Column*.

Benjamin Fondane publishes the collection of poems *Faux traité d'esthétique* in Paris.

Victor Brauner moves finally to Paris and illustrates Lautréamont's collected works together with Max Ernst and René Magritte.

The establishment of the royal dictatorship by King Carol II, who proclaims a new constitution.

A decree abolishes all political parties and associations. Codreanu is murdered on royal order.

## — 1939

Marcel Iancu exhibits for the last time in Bucharest together with Milița Petrașcu.

Victor Brauner has a one-man exhibition in Paris.

The premier Armand Călinescu is murdered by a group of Legionaries. A brutal repression follows in which more than 200 members of the Legionary movement are executed on the order of the king.

## — 1940

Romania receives an ultimatum from the Soviet Union demanding the cession of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Romania agrees to evacuate the territories. King Carol II is forced to abdicate in favor of his son Michael I. General Ion Antonescu is designated as head of state, in practice the dictator of Romania. Romania formally joins the Tripartite Pact.

## — 1941

Marcel Iancu emigrates to Palestine together with his family.

## — 1942–1946

Romania takes part in World War II. American and British air forces bomb Bucharest. The Soviet Union attacks on several fronts. Antonescu is arrested. Michael I turns to the Allies and Romania joins the war against Germany. Petru Groza forms a pro-communist government. General elections are held in 1946; officially the Communists obtain a majority.

## — 1947

Tristan Tzara visits Bucharest for the last time to participate in a congress of writers invited by Sașa Pană.

King Michael I is forced to abdicate and Romania is proclaimed a people's republic.

## NOTES

### **1** INTRODUCTION

- 1 S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 2–4.
- 2 See for instance Irwin Kessler, “The Quest for a Self in the 20th Century: Romanian Art,” *Plural* (Romanian Cultural Foundation, Bucharest), no. 2 (1999).
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#### **4 MARCEL IANCU BECOMES MARCEL JANCO**

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- 9 See for instance Seiwert, *Marcel Janco*, pp. 43–49, 439–440; but also Anca Bocăneț, “Marcel Iancu—arhitect/Marcel Janco—The Architect,” in *Centenar Marcel Iancu*, p. 28.
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- 55 Schrott, *Dada* 15/25, p. 139.
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## Little Paris of the Balkans

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- 18 Tzara's letters to his family are published in *Aldebaran*, nos. 2–4 (1996). The original letters are in the library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest (inv. no. 138665–138679). See also Mira Rinzler, letter to Tom Sandqvist, 3 March 2003.
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## 6 Samuel Rosenstock BECOMES Tristan Tzara

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## **7 The Symbolist AND DADAIST from Moinești**

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