

VISUAL LITERATURE. AVANT-GARDE AND EXPERIMENT

Review of the volume *Literatura vizuală. Avangardă și experiment* by Daniela Nagy, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință Printing House, 2017

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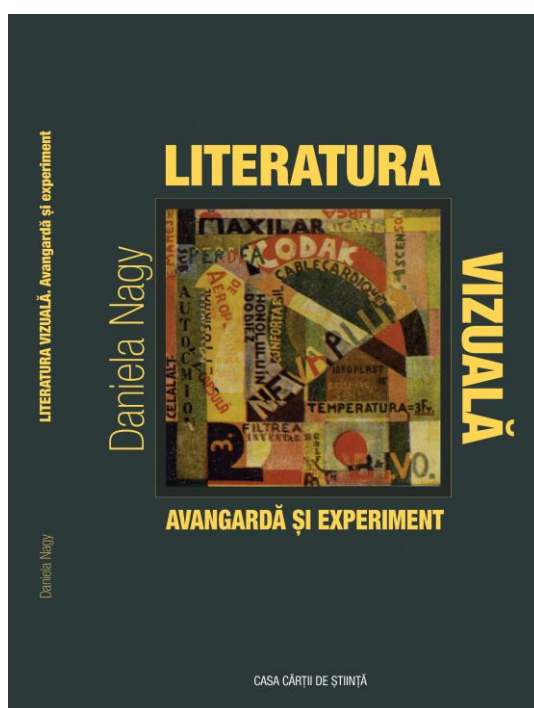


FIG.1 Daniela Nagy, *Literatura vizuală. Avangardă și experiment*. Front cover.

Visual Literature. Avant-garde and Experiment, by Daniela Nagy is a daring work of literary criticism that approaches a topic long avoided by the Romanian critics. Whereas the latter part of the twentieth century was being marked by the appearance of some important schools of visual literature overseas, in the United States of America, and especially in Latin America: Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Europe was gradually abandoning its appetency for the verbal-icon assembly that had emerged at the same pace with the literary avant-gardes. Contaminated by the challenges of multiple-combination possibilities between the very graphical sign and the visual context of its occurrence, the Romanian literary avant-gardes explore the extra-verbal elocution, employing, in the image-text interaction, trans-semiotic and meta-semiotic sign systems which they assume and hire iconic and verbal elements in interaction.

Regrettably, the classical image of Victor Brauner and Ilarie Voronca's pictopoem has become an icon of the Romanian literary avant-garde, in the absence of a reliable exploitation of the semiotic valences of this hybrid work.

Daniela Nagy, nevertheless, fosters, throughout her book, a complex, dynamic and trans-disciplinary approach in which the text is not perceived as a final unique and immutable product, but in agreement with the challenge of Umberto Eco's unlimited semiosis (*semiosi illimitata*):

(...) the quasi-infinite possibility of the verbal-iconic sign to define and interpret itself through other signs, thus offering the chance of understanding the text functionality as an auto-generative, autopoietic structure. The approach is complex from a double perspective:

- on the one side, due to the (a) postmodern and (b) post-postmodern (trans-modern) focus, consisting of (a) multiple, fragmentary lecture, without any claim of exhaustiveness or imposition of perspective and of (b) holistic, functionalist intention of unifying perspectives in order to describe the auto-generative verbal-iconic textual structure;
- on the other side, due to the dynamic approach to literary semiotics, whose study subject is the semiotic act, dynamic in itself and permanently enriched by the semiotic act that intervenes over the semiotic structure. (p.6)

The analysis from the perspective of the text's autopoiesis (verbal-iconic, in this case) is quite atypical for the Romanian literary criticism. Apart from Ion Manolescu, interested in the auto-productive structure of image (in *Videologia: o teorie tehnoculturală a imaginii globale*, published in 2003), the literary criticism preferred to focus on the study of divisions and alterations produced by the literary avant-gardes and to preserve multi-art experiments of some classics (Ion Barbu, Nichita Stănescu) outside the mainstream, while considering them pastimes unworthy of their authors.

Daniela Nagy's book stands out as a remarkable synthesis of verbal-iconic movements and trends in the Romanian literature of the past century, and mainly as a reliable theoretical synthesis and a singular interpretation (also holding a corrective role) of some confusions created in the field of literary avant-gardes' interpretation by the Romanian criticism. The confusions were generated by the superposition of Angelo Guglielmi's taxonomy (that entered specialized literature in Romania due to Marin Mincu), which distinguishes between avant-garde/ avant-gardism and experimentalism, over Peter Bürger's classical taxonomy, which identifies a stage of historical avant-garde and a post-avant-garde. Daniela Nagy discovers that the two classifications rely on the same ideology, evident, in case of the (historical) avant-garde, and almost inexistent, in case of post-avant-garde or experimentalism. Therefore, the author proposes the understanding and surpassing of Mincu's confusion, the critic who attached the ideological touch of Guglielmi's *-ism* (in reference to, in the host-literature, experimental literary groups of the 1960s, *Grupul 63* or *Novissimi*) to some singular creators, such as Emil Brumaru or Șerban Foarță. Moreover, the author fosters an interpretative scheme, defining individual experiment, experimentalism or neo-avant-garde and historical avant-garde in relation with two axes: individual/collective, respectively, constructivist/destructivist ideological support. Her viewpoint is not singular in the Romanian literary criticism, yet, some remark on behalf of Laurențiu Ulici, in an article of 1987, 'Text as an experiment' (in Romanian, *Textul ca experiment*), published by *Contemporanul* magazine, which could have brought to a halt Mincu's erroneous interpretations, was disregarded: "To 'post-avant-gardism', the literary critic [author's note: Marin Mincu] takes over the term 'experimentalism' from the Italian criticism, a term that has been in circulation before, in our literary criticism of the '60s, in connection with the echoes of the 'new novel' in fiction and structuralism, in literary analysis".

Accordingly, Daniela Nagy does not only propose a chronological analysis of more or less active forms of the Romanian visual literature, but also takes a critical attitude toward a theoretical apparatus that is slightly altered because of the need of promoting an interpretative uniqueness.

Thus, analysis of the Romanian literary avant-garde's place within the similar European movement, the survey of the Romanian waves of historical avant-garde, identification of dominant avant-garde movement in the Romanian cultural space: constructivist-integralist from *Contimporanul* magazine and its satellite magazines, *75 H.P.*, *Punct* and *Integral* (including futurist and Dadaist echoes of the integralist melting-pot) and surrealist (from *unu*, *Urmuz* and from magazines of the minor mimetism) are but simple steps of a methodical, original and steady enterprise. The most articulate example of complex understanding of manifesting peculiarities of the national avant-gardism is the one related to the strange synthesis of the avant-garde and tradition with Voronca, which implied a four decade-anticipation of what was to become the dissolution of the historical avant-garde into post-avant-gardism:

This is the expression of maximum closeness of the avant-garde art to a tradition holding an amazing potential of manifestation, renewing, cyclically, a form of preceding. Moreover, *Integral* becomes a form of capitalizing of the aesthetically unindoctrinated culture, manifested in its pure form, consonant with the art practiced by Brâncuși, opposing the degenerative borrowings, respectively a tradition of the cult creation that slipped away into imitation and mannerism. Through this positioning, integralism stands against Dadaism, a movement that begins demolition at the deep layers of culture. Within the Romanian culture, integralism becomes reference for the whole literary avant-garde, characterizing it and placing itself, beyond this, in the 'avant-garde' of the European experimentalism. (p.56)

Each of the avant-garde movements (the author prefers the phrase 'waves of the avant-garde') that occurred in Romania, but also each of the forms of experimental expression, benefit from analyses that prove a superior understanding of the phenomenon. The research is rigorously projected and is set around the main objective, "*the rigorous analysis of the natural continuity in the verbal-iconic assembly present in the Romanian literature*", through a multi-disciplinary approach, focused on the perspectives of semiotics and literary theory and analysis" (p.77). The semiotic interpretation of the verbal –iconic creations of the Romanian literature included works belonging to Urmuz, Tristan Tzara, Ion Vinea, Ilarie Voronca, Mihail Cosma, Geo Bogza, Sașa Pană, Gelu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu, Isisore Isou a.o. (in parallel with the avant-gardist literature of the manifestos), literary experiments of Ion Barbu, Nichita Stănescu, Șerban Foarță, of the authors belonging to the 1980s - Mircea Cărtărescu, Romulus Bucur, Daniel Pișcu, Florin Iaru, Traian T. Coșovei a.o., paradoxist poems, visual literature of *Aisberg* mural magazine and that of *Infinitezimal* magazine, as well as other multiart occurrences of recent time. The literary analysis, perceived in its dynamics, in the autopoietic intention declared from the very beginning, is a fine mapping of the verbal-iconic occurrences in the Romanian literature.

It underlines the “undermining of literature by the letter”, specific to the visual poetry of the avant-garde, the liberation of speech from convention and marriage of the text to the iconic assembly (through the appearance of pictopoem), derails toward “typography” and calligrammes, the experimental valences of the Barbian poetry, to which speech becomes insufficient to itself, sliding toward the geometry of rhythm, toward symbolic geometrism, the semiotic incapacity of the Stanescian word, reverberations of a concretism unknown to the Romanian cultural space, expressed with a certain postponement, verbal-iconic manifestations of the 1980s: typographic poems, calligrammes and anti-calligrammes, as well as visual experiments of the past two decades. The result is an excellent work, unique in what regards the approach (until now!) within the national literary criticism, through which the author, Daniela Nagy, claims the very “necessity of a solid critical engagement in the area of Romanian visual literature”.

REFERENCES

- [1] Nagy, Daniela. (2017). *Literatura vizuală. Avangardă și experiment*. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință Printing House 171-225.