From “Inbetween” to “Double” Peripherality

The study of transnational literatures has been on a rising tide in the field of academic research ever since postcolonial studies have started to lack in certain protocols regarding the investigation of contemporary literatures that are more specifically transnational rather than strictly postcolonial. While transnational communities and diasporic cultures are far from being a new sociological phenomenon, the rise of transnationalism today is influenced by the “the scale of intensity and simultaneity of current long distance, cross-border activities”\(^1\). Moreover, the recent technological advancements in the field of communication (telecommunications, global travel, the Internet) further stimulate contemporary transnational communities. Transnational literatures often surpass the terminological strictures imposed by postcolonial studies. Aspects such as border-crossing, bricolage, cultural syncretism, hybridity or spatial displacements need not necessarily involve the creation of radical new identities that are in a critical position towards the colonial discourse. Furthermore, transnationalism is concerned with a wide range of cultural dimensions that span from social morphology and new iterations in reconstructing “place and locality” (Vertovec) to the ability to create new types of consciousness that envelop multiple identifications to more than one
nation. Thus, transnational literatures open up to different social and political fields of engagement that ultimately evolve into new rapports between the individual and local space.

It could be argued, however, that the birth of globalization is traceable to as early as the second half of the nineteenth century, with the development of the first technological versions of what we now use as examples of tools that facilitated the emergence of globalization. Beyond these early technological advancements, the perception of time and space underwent radical changes at the time. As David Harvey points out:

The expansion of the railway network, accompanied by the advent of the telegraph, the growth of steam shipping, and the building of the Suez Canal, the beginnings of radio communication and bicycle and automobile travel at the end of the century, all changed the sense of time and space in radical ways. This period also saw the coming on stream of a whole series of technical innovations. New ways of viewing space and motion (derived from photography and exploration of the limits of perspectivism) began to be thought out and applied to the production of urban space [...]. Balloon travel and photography from on high changed perceptions of the earth’s surface, while new technologies of printing and mechanical reproduction allowed a dissemination of news, information, and cultural artefacts throughout even broader swathes of the population.

In this context, the emergence of international artistic phenomena was an obvious consequence of technological, economic and political advancements around the globe, as “neither literature nor art could avoid the question of internationalism, synchrony, insecure temporality, and the tension within the dominant measure of value between the financial system and its monetary or commodity base.” Within these theoretical and methodological frameworks, the transnational study of literary phenomena comes as a rather self-evident evolutionary leap in the field of literary studies.

For the Romanian literary field, however, applying the new theoretical concepts from the area of World Literature (of which “transnational studies” is only a subfield) has proven to be quite difficult, mainly because of a certain tradition, specific to the Romanian literary historiography, of automating the aesthetic against all other aspects. Nonetheless, a period of systematic recovery of the so-called “marginal literatures” has started since the beginning of the 2000s that could be regarded as a sign of a relative normalization in the field of Romanian literary studies. An eloquent example could be considered the East-Central European avant-gardes. Choosing this exact geo-literary segment is not arbitrary (it also covers both literatures from the so-called Mitteleuropa and Eastern Europe – a concept that has acquired a wholly different meaning after the establishment of Soviet hegemony following the Second World War). To this day, Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer’s History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe... is the primary source of information for any foreign scholar regarding this geo-literary space. The literary case study of East-Central European literatures is symptomatic for the challenges of applying a transnational mode of reading, since
peripherality” as a model of “interliterary dependence” within the East-Central European geoliterary space. While Tötösy de Zepetnek’s concept is functional insofar as it explains the specific position of these national literatures in their post-war period of development, I propose, in the case of the historical avant-gardes of this space, this intermediary concept, which I find better suited for its position in the literary system (both national and international). A peripherality that comes both from within their national borders and from within the so-called “international avant-garde”. While it is tempting to assume that, by the egalitarian logic imposed by the mere idea of “internationalism”, there cannot be a relation of peripherality between Western and non-Western avant-gardes, the power structure is quite obvious if we consider that the only way to acquire cultural capital by the avant-garde writers of the latter, “marginal” spaces was to externally validate themselves by becoming expats in the main artistic centers of the West (take Gherasim Luca or Tristan Tzara for example). Therefore, double peripherality grants these avant-gardes the main specificity of their transnationalism. Cultural politics of universality found in the European literary discourse of the beginning of the twentieth century cannot be understood outside of analyzing the main programmes of East-Central European avant-gardes, as they prove, perhaps more than any other literary phenomenon, the fact that “the existence of multinational literature(s) as products of ‘specific interliterary communities’ (...) and the prominence of migration phenomena have contributed [...] to the questioning of the equivalence of language, nation, and identity”.

Last but not least, the idea of a certain transnational ethos of these avant-gardes (that can be traced through synthesizing both the local particularities of these literatures and the interliterary strategies that consolidated the existence of a true network of the European avant-garde) is also promising. One could argue that a transnational history of the East-Central European avant-garde can also be regarded as an eloquent history of interliterary relationships between European cultures of the twentieth century. Of course, the so-called “transnational turn” cannot be considered a homogenous process in discussing these literatures. Aspects that concern the fluidity of borders and the multiple interferences, both local and otherwise, have to be taken into consideration. For example, the leftist ideology of the Romanian avant-garde does not come by direct contact with Russia, but by means of cultural ricochet via the West. The first time one of Mayakovsky’s poems was translated in Romania occurred only in 1923 in Contimporanul magazine. And another instance, in Hungary, the avant-garde magazine A tető [The Deed], that was survived by Ma [Today] after 1916, had been banned for including works from countries at war with Austria-Hungary. Such interliterary contacts were, thus, both mediated and made difficult by Western influence. However, the “transnational turn” does challenge the idea of a privileged role of nation as a fundamental unit of analysis of a literary community.

Before discussing any type of interliterary network between the avant-gardes of East-Central Europe, a preliminary account on the conditions of forging transnational relations between them needs to be made. This is because the so-called peripheral avant-gardes needed to have a sort of base model for interliterary networks to be made, and by virtue of the first major European currents, these base models were provided by different types of international models of circulation, as they can be observed when analyzing Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism from this perspective. It is essential to take into consideration the fact that centrality (seen as a primary force of cultural determination) was not the only decisive factor in avant-garde networking. Cultural centers such as Paris or Berlin, while being catalytic in the development of transnational artistic networks, also underwent a series of changes that made their centrality rather transient (the most obvious case is Paris after 1940, when the global capital of modernism shifted to New York). In this context, it was peripheral mobility that assured the survival of the avant-gardes during the Second World War.

**“Emblems of modernity”. Avant-garde transnationalism between internationality and internationalism**

In what follows I will try to address succinctly the functional differences between some concepts that pertain to what traditional critical discourses have used in order to analyze the historical avant-garde. I will begin with the “obvious” feature of the avant-garde: internationality. For a long time put in opposition to the idea of national literature or art (such as the case of the “European” label used to counter nationalist frameworks), the internationality of the avant-garde was an emblem of modernity that gathered all the traits of the current. Cross-border initiatives such as publishing in multilingual periodicals or participating at international exhibitions and conferences were seen as endeavors that transcended national artistic aspirations and attracted criticism from conservative and nationalist intellectuals. This inherent internationality, did not, however, contradict the inclusion of national or nationalist frameworks:

[S]everal movements, groups and individual artists within the avant-garde combined a transnational praxis with nationalist programmatic or aesthetic conceptions derived from regional cultural
practices which might be labelled national. An obvious case is Italian futurism, which operated in the transnational arena, but was aligned simultaneously with Italian fascism. [...] In some cases, the combination of avant-garde aesthetics and national or nationalist politics even led to a critical refutation of the internationality of other sections of the avant-garde, as did Der Sturm editor and Bauhaus professor Lothar Schreyer, who to some extent reversed the internationalist rejection of nationality as a relevant category15.

Another feature associated with the historical avant-garde (and in close relation to internationality) is cosmopolitanism. As with the case of internationality, cosmopolitanism, as a privileged mode of individual cross-border mobility in the period, did not interfere with national(ist) values. While there are cases where cosmopolitanism was a stance taken in opposition to extreme nationalist conceptions (the case of avant-garde artists of Jewish origin is exemplary in this respect), avant-garde cosmopolitanism in general was seen as an emblem of modernity, and a cultural imperative in itself towards a European art.

The next feature I would like to clarify is “internationalism”. Often regarded as an emanation of the socialist international14, a similarity rightly signaled keeping in mind the socialist beginnings of most of the avant-garde artists (even in the case of F.T. Marinetti), the internationalism of the historical avant-garde was also influenced by factors extraneous to ideology. Such is the case of the Esperanto movement, which was, at the time, flourishing all throughout Europe, and the expansion of modern “imperialist” capitalism. All of the internationalist features of the international socialism, the Esperanto movement, and capitalism permeated the artistic avant-gardes and many of the core features of the movement remain indebted to all of the three major international phenomena: the linguistic creativity and heterogeneity of the avant-garde was a clear-cut feature built upon the relative notoriety of Esperanto, the ideological and programmatic aspect of the avant-garde (negation of tradition on one hand, affirmative and constructivist reintegration of art into the “praxis of life”15 on the other) was a clear consequence of the socialist international, and, finally, the transnational networking employed for the dissemination of the movements was very much akin to the capitalist logic of the time16.

These features which I have discussed point towards a better understanding of the different functions of internationality and internationalism. While international or cosmopolitan, the avant-garde is not exclusively internationalist, as it oftentimes enters in quite a harmonious coexistence with nationalism (Italian Futurism, Serbian Zenitism, Flemish Expressionism etc.). Similarly, transnationality explains and brings together internationality and cosmopolitanism without it necessarily including (or treating in exclusive terms) internationalism as a pre-given omnipresent feature of the historical avant-garde. At the same time, internationalism does not equate strictly to socialist internationalism17. As I have mentioned earlier, avant-garde internationalism synthesizes other supranational, supra-ideological phenomena that occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This is why I choose to discuss different types of internationalism, or, simply put, about internationalisms, without keeping in mind necessarily a functional opposition to the “national”, but rather including the latter as a pre-given cultural construct within the European framework. Thus, internationalism designates, to my mind, all essential aspects that pertain to avant-garde transnationalism seen as “as a mobile sign within the discourse of modernism”18.

In the case of the European avant-garde, there are three types of supra-ideological internationalism, manifested through the transnational networks of the three central avant-garde movements: Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism. In its most representative form, Futurism followed a center-periphery model of communication and diffusion of manifestos, while also giving way to different “national” futurisms (Polish and Russian futurism being the most well-known). The Manifesto of Futurism, published in 1909, marked the emergence of the literary manifesto as a self-conscious genre, that was later imported in virtually all the national avant-gardes. Alongside the futurist manifesto, a new-found consciousness on the integration of art through militant practice was born. F.T. Marinetti’s unique model for the dissemination of his avant-garde manifesto also made clear, if involuntarily, another phenomenon: while Paris was the indisputable cultural center of the world, the peripheries made for the best venues for militant avant-garde programmes19, the most obvious case for this brand of internationalism being Russian Futurism, which detached itself wholly from its Marinettian origins20.

A different stance was taken with Dada. In an evident move against the ideologically contaminated Futurism, Dada opted for an a-centric, non-national (and anti-national) type of internationalism21, founded on a capitalist logic of networking (with the existence of a Berlin Dada office dubbed as “world headquarters”, for instance), with journals and publications produced all over the world22, and even with a “traveling” journal, Francis Picabia’s 391 (with issues reporting Dada activities in Barcelona, Geneva, Paris, New York, and Zürich). While this ephemeral form of internationalism also meant that national manifestations of Dada were impossible to materialize, both formal aspects of the
current and traveling mechanisms were ultimately employed by East-Central European literatures in their own versions of avant-garde.

Finally, Surrealism, while latent in its manifestations throughout East-Central Europe (with the notable exception of Yugoslavia, Surrealism only emerged in the 1930s), had a very strong peripheral diffusion through the adjacent “national” Surrealisms: the Bucharest Surrealist Group, the Budapest Group (called “The European School”), Skupina Ra (the Czech version of Surrealism), as well as alternative Surrealist groups founded in the semi-peripheries (Surréalisme Révolutionnaire, the CoBrA Group).

Moving away from the destructive, nihilistic pattern of Dada, the Surrealist internationalism was also the most devoted to the idea of socialist revolution. This could explain its permeation within East-Central European avant-gardes in the 1930s, as the rise of fascism in these countries on one side and the birth of a stronger social consciousness of the younger generation of artists on the other, as well as the general fading of Constructivism made way for Surrealism to develop (if belatedly) in the region.

I attempted to chart the various mechanisms specific to the aforementioned internationalisms in order to make clear the different “base models” for transnational networking in East-Central European avant-gardes. I chose to leave out Constructivism in this networking equation simply because, while it is the single most “naturalized” current in East-Central European avant-gardes, its popularization within this geopolitical space followed an all-encompassing logic that is more similar to the overall reception of Western avant-garde currents than to the internationalist mechanisms of Futurism, Dada, or Surrealism. Because of this naturalization, its internationalism cannot be traced through the same common denominators as in the case of the latter movements. Rather each of the East-Central avant-gardes have had different paths for internalizing Constructivism that contained elements of the three “central” currents. Thus, the permeation of Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism within the East-Central European space followed a logic dictated by an avant-garde center, while Constructivism flourished in these areas by accommodating the main features of the former currents in an eclectic manner and mobilizing them through their inherent particular networking mechanisms.

As I have tried to show, the transnational configurations of East-Central European historical avant-gardes can be explained through the framework illustrated above. On one hand, their double-peripheral position within the national and international literary systems made it easier for these avant-gardes to communicate with each other, while on the other, the mechanisms specific to each of the central currents discussed helped shape the different mechanisms employed in transnational dialogues between the East-Central European avant-gardes. The strategies discussed above are, nonetheless, both historically seen as hostile to the idea of national values and used by many authors that, over the time, became immigrants or expats.

This is also why there exists, in discussing the East-Central European avant-gardes, the problem of belonging. To whom, at the end of the day, do authors such as born-in-Romania Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca, Gherasim Luca or Hungarian painters and sculptors such as József Csáky or Álfréd Réth belong? To what extent can national literatures from East-Central Europe appropriate such artists, since they are clearly artists that have contributed to the “worlding” of literature and to the configuration of European literature as we know it? These questions clearly challenge our way of viewing national literatures, and to this extent, East-Central European avant-gardes
represent one of the most symptomatic cases for the newer paradigms of literary studies. For such an endeavor, however, we must look at these "marginal" materializations of international trend-currents as one of the most representative examples for the idea of World Literature.

Note:

3. Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, 262-263.
6. “The time and space I refer to is that of (East) Central Europe, a space and location of ‘inbetween peripherality’, by which I mean both inbetweeness (the focus between centers of power, economic and cultural) and peripherality on the European landscape (history, culture, politics etc.)”, Steven Tőtősy de Zepetnek, “Configurations of Postcoloniality and National Identity: Inbetween Peripherality and Narratives of Change”, The Comparatist 23, no. 1 (1999), 89.
7. See Andrei Ţerian, Critica de export (Bucureşti: Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2013), 115.
8. The limits of postcolonial theory in East-Central Europe were eloquently underlined in Ţerian, Critica de export, 104-129
9. Marcel Cornis-Pope has a similar take on the position of the historical avant-gardes within their literary (sub)system: “Like all other avant-gardes, the Romanian prided itself with being refractory and ‘parasitical’ to the body of mainstream culture – living in a provisional state, on itself with being refractory and ‘parasitical’ to the body system: "Like all other avant-gardes, the Romanian prided of the historical avant-gardes within their literary (sub)
11. While similar endeavors have appeared in the Western historiographical circuit (to name a few: Krisztiina Passuth, Les Avant-Gardes de l’Europe Centrale 1907-1927, 1988, Timothy O. Benson, Central-European Avant-Gardes. Exchange and Transformation, 2002, or Béatrice Joyeux-
12. “Contacts with the Russian avant-garde comes by means of Western publications, Italian, French or German. We will find, in our magazines, no reference to David Burliuk, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, for example, the informational blockade being caused – in all likelihood – by the Romanian state’s policy of blockade towards the USSR after 1918, furthermore accentuated by the Mîrzescu law through which – in 1924 – the Romanian Communist Party has been illegalized”. Paul Cernat, Avangarda românească și complexul periferiei (București: Cartea Românească, 2007), 259-260. My translation.
15. See Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, Translated by Michael Shaw, Foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.
16. “If the motivation for this internationalism was first and foremost the opposition to the nationalizing war and its aftermath, Dada also sought out actual practices and theories of internationalism on which to model its own aspirations. The first such model was capitalism and specifically the multinational corporation. The Berlin Dada office was regularly referred to as ‘world headquarters’, and Grosz and Heartfield used letterhead that read ‘Gross-Heartfield-Works – Berlin, London, New York’. Dada even imitated the very language of this capitalist internationalism, namely, finance capital: ‘Invest your money in Dada’ is one such preferred slogan; another manifesto assures the reader, ‘The orders of the Dada bank are accepted all over the world’”. Marin Puchner, Poetry of the Revolution, 140.
17. The central thesis of Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde, which is to circumscribe the historical avant-garde to the attempt “to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (49), does not take into account Futurism. While it is true that the beginnings of the Italian-born movement (a rather short-lived) transition between Marinetti’s aestheticist-symbolist origins and the de facto birth of Futurism) would render difficult the theoretician’s attempt to superimpose avant-garde artistic praxis with Marxist political practice, the absence of any discussion on Futurism is symptomatic for the relative shortsightedness associated to any effort to
equate the historical avant-garde to Marxist practices.


19. I have shown, with statistical data, the diffusion and reception of Futurism in the Romanian space. See Emanuel Modoc, *Traveling Avant-Gardes. The Case of Futurism in Romania*, in *The Culture of Translation in Romania*, eds. Maria Sass, Ștefan Baghiu, Vlad Pojoga (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), 45-62.

20. On the spread of Futurism in the peripheries, Trotsky wrote: “A phenomenon was observed which has been repeated in history more than once, namely, that the backward countries [...] reflected in their ideology the achievements of the advanced countries more brilliantly and strongly. In this way, German thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflected the economic achievements of England and the political achievements of France. In the same way, Futurism obtained its most brilliant expression, not in America and not in Germany, but in Italy and in Russia”. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 126-127.

21. Puchner notes, on the ambiguous, ever-transient state of Dada: “Most nondadaists [...] chose to see this internationalism through national eyes. In Paris, Dada was seen as either German or American, in America it was perceived as French, in Berlin it was seen as Swiss, in Switzerland it was seen as a mixture of French, Romanian, and German – the only attribute that seems to have remained stable was that of being imported, nonnative, and foreign”. Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 135.


References


