

Towards Free Verse by Way of Ion Minulescu's Poetry

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*"In what worlds have you
lived the nightmare of the
tales untold/ And in what
star have you found the color
of discolored madness?..."*
(Ion Minulescu)

ION MINULESCU is a poet whose absence from a history of the Romanian literature could not be in any way justified, despite the fact that the value judgments from the literary histories already written often seem paradoxical. His universally acknowledged merit consists of the popularization of the symbolist trend in Romanian literature. A first incongruity thus emerges, namely, the contrast between the elitist aspect of the aesthetic formula which he represents and the unprecedented public sympathy won by his poetry immediately after the publication of his first volume. It was this contrast that generated debates concerning the authenticity of his status as a symbolist poet. He is the one to whom critics ascribe the revitalization of poetic language at the beginning of the 20th century, which he managed to free both from the excesses of the promoters of traditional literature and from the imitation of Eminescu's work, in which the poetry of that time had got stuck. Minulescu's success after the departure from the imitation of Eminescu's poetry (which also marked his debut) resulted in another imitative trend, this time bearing his name, but

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he was not able, in the critics' opinion, to rise to a top position among interwar poets such as George Bacovia, Lucian Blaga, Tudor Arghezi or Ion Barbu, for whom he had actually paved the way. In other words, Minulescu had the merit of putting an end to an episode in the history of the Romanian poetry and of opening another, but he did not have the necessary strength to change this opening into first-rate work. To sum up, Minulescu is considered a great innovator, but a minor poet nonetheless.

Still, the comments upon his innovations share the same paradoxical aspect and have as a starting point the doubts about the legitimacy of calling him a symbolist poet. At first sight, he enters the spirit of the adopted trend and innovates both content and form accordingly. He uses symbolist themes and motifs, he tackles urban subjects, he desentimentalizes his poetry, he refreshes the poetic language by means of neologisms, and, at the formal level, he promotes the use of free verse. But the value of all these aspects, which were noticed by critics right from the beginning and which were continuously repeated afterwards, decreased almost as soon as they were identified. His symbolism was considered superficial, while his free verse was denounced as a mere typographical revolution consisting of breaking and reorganizing the rhyming verse. These obvious contradictions between the features of his poetry and its impact upon the literary world at the beginning of the 20th century—the consolidation of the symbolist trend through poems which were only superficially symbolist, the promotion of free verse while actually using the traditional one—guided the subsequent interpretative approaches. In general, critics attempted to reassess the content of his work both extensively, by exploring other areas of his writing, such as his debut poems, epigrams, articles, even plays and novels, and intensively, by focusing only on his published poems, in order either to contradict the idea that he was a superficial symbolist poet or to reduce the importance of the symbolist factor by identifying some deeper strata of his work, other than the symbolist one.

The characteristics of his versification have been much less explored, despite the fact that almost all of those who approached his work seem to have felt compelled at least to mention the peculiarity of Minulescu's verse, even if they usually confined themselves to the repetition of the initial verdict, thus revealing that form represented an essential criterion for establishing his place in the canon of Romanian literature. All the same, there are two more extensive studies on the problem, which served as benchmarks for the succeeding critics. The first one is Tudor Vianu's article—"Ion Minulescu al posterității" (Ion Minulescu for posterity)—published after the poet's death and in the context of the existence of two final editions of poems published during the author's life. The second one is Vladimir Streinu's *Versificația modernă* (Modern versi-

fication), an extensive research into the European and Romanian history of free verse. These studies seem to have settled once and for all the question of Minulescu's verse. While Vianu's article appeared as an afterword to the poet's life and work, Streinu's thorough exploration of its object left no place for other commentaries.

According to Vianu, "many of Minulescu's novelties were only apparent. Thus, in the first place, his famous free verse, whose graphical irregularity served as a strong reason not only for the distrust, but also for the interest which it was shown."²¹ The reconstruction of the regular lines "is not worth resuming for purely elementary demonstrations. The apparent liberties of Minulescu's versification were nothing more than a way of noting things down, . . . a simple technique of transcription meant to stress the pauses and to isolate certain words or parts of the sentence in order to highlight them"²² and show how to read them aloud. Streinu, on the other hand, concludes: "Concerning the versification, the revolution proclaimed with grand gestures and theatrical attitudes was thus a... typographical revolution. The verse remains classic either when it simulates heterometric freedom or when it simulates prose"²³ and yet it is Minulescu who "popularizes . . . the idea of free verse more than any other poet."²⁴

But grounds for a more detailed approach to Minulescu's versification can be found precisely at the point where the debate seemed to have come to an end. Some of Streinu's comments encourage such an attempt. Despite maintaining that the poet uniformly used the broken classic line, especially in his first volume, he expressed less strong opinions when he wrote that "even if free verse were totally missing [from his poems, which is not the case, as the critic himself notices], its investigation in our poetry could not disregard the aesthetic and historical role of Minulescu's rhythms. The aesthetics of free verse legitimizes them even in the typographical form."²⁵ Streinu also states that the poet

understood the essence of the problem [the revolution of versification]. In other words, if the line is typographically isolated in order to become more visible, the same right should be granted to each of its more significant components or to any single word, when this is the radiant core of the entire line. Thus, nothing should prevent a fragment of the line or the minimal fragment, which is the word, from being treated typographically as a whole line. It is to be supposed that Minulescu's false free verse was based on a deeper intuition of the nature of free verse than appearances reveal. Although the poem is traditionally conceived, the typographic organization has an aesthetic role which cannot be neglected.⁶

All these assertions seem to have been passed over by later critics.

Dumitru Micu is another critic whose attention was caught by Minulescu's versification. At first, in *Început de secol (1900–1916): Curente și scriitori* (Beginning of a century, 1900–1916: Trends and writers), he embraces the dominant opinion and only mentions, in brackets, that Minulescu's free verse is deceptive.⁷ Later on, however, in a different study, he more closely examined the poems and noticed the difficulty of prosodic reconstruction in three cases: *Romanța noului venit* (The song of the newcomer), *Spre insula enigmă* (Towards the enigmatic island) and *Pelerinii morții* (Death's pilgrims), which "refuse to wear the corset of any classic meter."⁸ Two other studies, which have chiefly statistical objectives and encompass large periods of Romanian literature, argue for new research on Minulescu's prosody. One of them is Ladislau Gáldi's history of Romanian versification,⁹ revealing the gradual transition from traditional verse towards the free one. Within this process, Minulescu's poetry is anything but unimportant. The second study, signed by Mihaela Mancaș, surveys the Romanian artistic language from the first half of the 20th century in the form of a detailed inventory of the syntactic and semantic figures used throughout this period. According to Mancaș, the correlation of syntactic data could change the poetic hierarchy of that epoch. Thus, Minulescu

is, maybe, the only poet of his generation for whom syntax was as important in the production of figurative sense as the semantics of tropes. Minulescu's lyrical text evolves only in parallel with the modifications of the structural tropes and, moreover, the meaning of the whole text is totally subordinated to syntactic figures. And this happens not only because the tendency towards the musicalization of the structure . . . comes before everything else, but also because Minulescu's poetry is an example of perfect correlation of the two figurative levels with the prosody, not in favor of the level of the tropes—as in almost all interwar literature—, but in favor of syntactic symmetry and prosodic innovation. It is in this area that Minulescu's essential contribution should be looked for.¹⁰

The distance between the disregard shown by critics to Minulescu's verse in comparison to the content of his work and the reversal of their importance is quite remarkable here. In fact, the inventory of the symbols and metaphors of the same period barely mentions the poet's contribution at this level.

But the assertions which encourage new debates on the importance of Minulescu's reform and see in it a positive effort springing from an artistic conscience remain isolated in a large corpus of data and usually take the form of simple declarations. A full inquiry into the possibilities they hint at involves a very close reading meant to examine to what extent the reconstruction of

regular lines is possible, to check if there are significant differences between the reconstructed poem and its broken variant, to explain these alterations, to identify the criteria of segmentation and the points where the reconstruction is blocked and to reflect on how this blockage can be accounted for. All of these questions can lead in the end to a new evaluation of Minulescu's innovative role and to more general questions concerning the function and the evolution of versification.

THE DEBUT volume, *Românțe pentru mai târziu* (Songs for later, 1908),¹¹ which made him very popular and which is generally considered the turning point in the poetry of that period, provides the most appropriate context in which the critics' assertions can be put to the test. It is a more unitary volume than the following ones, which are characterized by the dilution of the symbolist formula in parallel with a return to traditionalism, as well as by self-pastiche. Published at long intervals, as the poets who would get to the top positions in our interwar poetry began to come into the limelight, these volumes are no longer considered innovative landmarks, but means of consolidating his formula. In fact, the poet gradually shifts his attention towards prose and drama. Consequently, any attempt to evaluate the degree of innovation in Minulescu's poetry must focus first of all on the volume with the greatest impact.

Even if, in Vianu's view, the reconstruction of the original lines from the broken ones is a pointless exercise, this attempt can offer an insight into Minulescu's poetic mechanisms if one contrasts its results with the typographical rearrangement from the volume. Subjected to this game, the first poem—*Românța noului venit* (The song of the newcomer)—reveals several interesting aspects. The irregularity, or rather the absence of stanzas, is noticeable at a first glance. The text consists of five parts, the last one being separated from the others by a line of dots and representing in fact only one line of the poem. In order to draw a comparison between the real form and the supposed one it is necessary to distinguish between *rows* (which are the actual irregular lines of the poem in its published form) and *lines* (by which we understand the reconstructed ordinary lines). Thus, the first fragment consists of seven rows which can be reduced to a perfectly regular quatrain of seventeen-syllable lines, whose rhyming scheme is *abab*. It is only the first two lines that are broken, while the last ones remain unchanged. In both cases, the division is made precisely before the caesura, the second half of the first line being further divided into two equal fragments. All these divisions correspond to some units of meaning: "Străinule ce bați la poartă,/ De unde vii/ Și cine ești?.../ Străinule de lumea noastră,/ Răspunde-ne de unde vii" (Stranger knocking on the door,/ Where

do you come from?/ And who are you?.../ Stranger to our world,/ Tell us where you come from). There seems to be nothing unusual in this type of reordering, which some detailed analyses have already highlighted. However, it is possible to detect some slight instability induced by the double stop on the caesura. This break creates the impression that the stanza is made of short lines (consisting of nine or eight syllables), and the feeling is all the stronger because the typographic distribution makes it possible for the first row to rhyme partially with the fourth one (poartă/noastră), thus creating the expectation of a similar connection between the third row and the fifth (ești/vii), which is obviously contradicted and felt as such. Only the last two lines, which have retained their initial length, correct the momentary impression of discordance, showing that the basic rhythmical unit of the poem is the group of seventeen syllables: “Prin care lumi trăiși coșmarul nepovestitelor povești/ Și-n care care stea gășiși culoarea decoloratei nebunii?...” (In what worlds have you lived the nightmare of the tales untold/ And in what star have you found the color of discolored madness?...). The result is a feeling of instability which prevails over the cadence of the rhymed verse, no matter how easy it is to reassemble the initial structure.

The second sequence, which contains the wanderer's answer, displays new methods of resistance to the reconstructive attempt. It begins with the reiteration of the initial question: “De unde vin?...” (Where do I come from?...). This first row rejects any possibility of integration in a reconstructed line. It is in fact an additional element, placed in a strategic position, echoing a unit of meaning from the first part and anticipating the beginning of the third fragment. This proves that its function is to create a repetitive meaningful structure which extends beyond the limits of the stanzas. This row acts as a catalyst for meaning and extracts certain key phrases from anonymity of the traditional verse, even at the expense of the metronome rhythm of the poem. The next two rows represent the two halves of a long line rhyming with the unchanged line which comes next. They are followed by two short rows—“Priviți.../ Sandalele-mi sunt rupte” (Look.../ My sandals are broken)—totaling nine syllables, that is to say half a line, which cannot find its other half. Nevertheless, the mere introduction of this fragment has remarkable effects on the whole stanza. The attempt to rebuild the original line by uniting it with the next hemistich, which seems the most adequate solution at this point, would generate a series of rearrangements leading to the thorough obliteration of the rhymes and to the final realization that there still is an extra hemistich left and that the only two original lines which remained unchanged (one of them being the last) should be broken in the middle in order to complete the rest of the rows. In other words, if we include the reconstructed half, the end of all the following lines rebuilt in this manner will coincide in fact with the caesura. The

only way to rediscover the rhymed verses is to leave this fragment aside. As a result, the seventh row—"Tar toga ce mi-o dete-Apolo" (And the toga given to me by Apollo)—merges with the eighth—"În noaptea când pornii spre voi" (The night when I made for your place) forming a full line which rhymes with the next unchanged line—"Abia-și mai flutură albastrul de-a lungul umerilor goi" (It barely waves its blue along the naked shoulders). Thus, all the following restored lines recuperate their length and rhymes. But the reconstructed fragment is not the perfectly ordered structure which one could have expected. Apart from the elements which do not fit into the framework, the regular lines do not form a geometrically precise group either, at least as far as the rhyme and a possible division into stanzas are concerned. The twelve long lines obtained in the end have different ways of grouping the rhymes. The first six form three rhyming couplets, the next four are grouped together according to a rhyming scheme of the *abab* type, while the last two form a rhyming couplet as well. The justification for the inner grouping is difficult to find. The possibility that it may correspond to a semantic whole is excluded. The first line of the group of four is a clause subordinated to a verb from a previous line, and the last one is coordinated with what follows. In conclusion, even in a reconstructed version of the poem, the expectations of regularity are contradicted by the discrepancies between prosodic organization and semantic structure. All these aspects justify the conclusion that rhyme has declining importance in this poem, along with the meter and the principle of organization into equal stanzas. The disruption of the regular lines makes the versification even less noticeable. In fact, the typographic rearrangement shows that the text does no longer aim at the concordance of lines at the end, but diverts attention towards their beginning. The major structural element of the second part of the poem is in fact anaphor. The long lines are reorganized in such a way so as to front the recurring words which introduce a new description of the people whom the stranger meets on his way. A succession of four "pe cei" (those), anticipated by "pe toți" (all), which appear at regular intervals, becomes the dominant structure of the fragment. It is this reiteration at the beginning of the rows that generates the rhythm of the whole fragment, and not the presence of rhymes at the end. The role of anaphor in organizing this part becomes even more conspicuous when one analyzes the reasons for the modifications of the supposed rhymed verse. Despite the fact that the semantic units usually fit the metrical limits, and, as a result, the typographic rearrangement is simplified to such a degree that it gives the impression of mere artifice, the relation between form and content knows divergences as well, and the choices they occasion can serve as clues about the principles which govern the reorganization of the text. In the second part, there are two moments when such a conflict occurs. The first one can be noticed in

the following rows: “Pe cei ce vrură să vă cânte române noi,/ Pe cei ce vrură” (Those who wanted to sing new songs to you,/ Those who wanted). In a rebuilt version, they would form one line in which the caesura would appear before “române noi” (new songs) creating a discrepancy between the metrical mold and the words which are cast into it. The caesura separates the direct object from the verb and unites it with the opening words of a new clause representing a new semantic unit. Moreover, the end of the reconstructed line separates the verb from its subordinate clause, thus suspending meaning for a moment. In this context, the typographic segmentations indicate both the author’s audacity and its limits. While, on the one hand, he ignores the caesura in favor of meaning and breaks the line after it, on the other hand, he does not go beyond the limit set by the line. In other words, he does not reunite in the same line the verb—“Pe cei ce *vrură*” (Those who *wanted*) and the object which it requires—“Să vă-ndrumeze spre mai bine—” (To guide you towards better aims—) and which would represent the first half of the following rebuilt line. The displacements are also motivated by the intention to bring to the fore the anaphoric structure which organizes the fragment. Thus, the last segment—“Pe cei ce vrură”—is placed at the beginning and its status changes. From a mere repetition which adds the necessary syllables to the long line, it becomes a structural element of the text. The disregard for the caesura also causes fluctuations of the regular beat, which becomes less perceptible at such points. The same thing happens in the second instance when the caesura is overlooked: “Și i-ați gonit cu pietre—/ Pietre ce s-ar preface-n pedestale” (And you drove them away with stones—/ Stones which would change into pedestals). In the line obtained after joining the two fragments, the caesura appears after the duplication of the word “pietre” (stones). This obscures the anadiplosis and changes it into a mere repetition, whose presence at this point is again justified in terms of syllabic necessities. The transfer of the second “pietre” (stones) from the weak position before the caesura to the privileged initial position invigorates its meaning and importance since the symbol is more obviously correlated and visually contrasted with its antonyms—“pedestale” (pedestals) and “ideale” (ideals): “Pietre ce s-ar preface-n pedestale/ În clipa când vă va cuprinde beția altor ideale!” (Stones which would change into pedestals/ The moment you become inebriated with other ideals).

The results signify more than sheer enhancement of meaning or of rhetorical structures, reduction of ambiguity or indication of a way of reading, as critics said. The reconstruction of the original lines does not encounter insurmountable difficulties, but its result reveals a series of subtler differences from the printed version. The background presence of the regular beat, although likely to be recuperated, has different degrees of visibility. Sometimes it is more

obvious (due to the presence of non-fragmented lines, to the rhyming couplets, to the overlap between the metrical limits and the semantic units, but especially to the fact that the decompositions take place within the line, not outside it), but at other times it is almost effaced (due to the combinations of rhymes, to the fragmentation into very small units, to the introduction of additional lines, to the absence of equal stanzas and to the disregard for the caesura). The reader discovers two overlapping structures which seem to clash in the text. There is a classic structure (with rhythm and rhyme) partially overshadowed by a very different arrangement, which tends to dismiss all the organizing principles of its counterpart. And it is the meaning of this confrontation that can be a measure of Minulescu's originality. But before exploring it any further, some new confirmations of the existence of such a mechanism are necessary.

The third part of the poem, which describes the newcomer's homeland, is built on a similar anaphoric structure. "Eu vin din lumea" (I come from the world), which is repeated twice, then "Din lumea..." (From the world), repeated five times, or only "Din" (From), repeated four times and followed by various descriptions, represent not only the points before which the long line is broken, but also the joints of the new disposition of the rows. The neglect of the caesura is even more frequent. The first six rows are obtained by splitting the long lines before or after it. The obvious aim is to isolate the units which create the new rhythm: "*De unde vin?/ Eu vin din lumea [//] creată dincolo de zare,/ Din lumea-n care n-a fost nimeni [//] din voi,/ Eu vin din lumea-n care/ Nu-i ceru-albastru,/ Și copacii [//] nu-s verzi așa cum sunt la voi*" (*Where do I come from?/ I come from the world created beyond the horizon,/ From the world where none of you has ever been,/ I come from the world in which/ There's no blue sky,/ And trees [//] are not green like in yours*). The caesura, indicated in the square brackets, is quite difficult to find, whether we just look at the text or whether we read it out loud. The rhymes are again disguised or even totally abandoned towards the end of the fragment so that the reassembly of the last six rows in two equal lines, although possible, would be entirely pointless. The semantic units which form these rows, especially the very short ones, which are built on syntactic parallelisms, seem to have gained full independence from any rules of versification: "Din țarm în țarm,/ Din țară-n țară,/ Din om în om,/ Din gură-n gură,—/ Din lumea celor patru vânturi/ Și patru puncte cardinale!..." (From shore to shore,/ From country to country,/ From man to man,/ From mouth to mouth,—/ From the world of the four winds/ And of the four compass points!...).

In the fourth fragment, there are no other innovations except the ones already mentioned, but the small alterations and their results are still manifest. After moving very far from the classic verse in the third part, Minulescu re-

turns to it at the end of the poem, and this reversion is perfectly consonant with the content. The pilgrim's appeal to the citizens to receive him among them as the messenger of the new art is rejected: "Dar poarta a rămas închisă la glasul artei viitoare./ Era prin anul una mie și nouă sute opt... îmi pare" (But the gate remained shut to the voice of the art of the future./ It was in the year one thousand nine hundred and eight... I think).

Even though the actual modifications of the rhymed verse are not quite remarkable in this poem, their consequences are. First of all, the graphical arrangement of the semantic units revives some latent meanings and creates a new rhythmical pattern which often eclipses the rhythm of the traditional verse, to the extent that the result can be termed free verse since it does not obey any rules concerning the regular beat, rhyme or the number of syllables. However, precisely when the liberation is about to become complete, the traditional verse reappears and restores its own order. This clash between two possible ways of organizing the poem reflects not only the theme of the conflict between the old art and the new perspective advocated by the newcomer, but also Minulescu's own vision of poetry. Traditional verse is perceived as an obsolete and ineffective mechanism which must be replaced. The poem needs other ways of organizing its meaning than classic prosody. However, it seems that the poet cannot entirely abandon the traditional form, whose musicality appeals to him. But the superimposition of a new structure on the conventional one dispels the harmonious effect of the classic verse and creates dissonance. In fact, the poem does not illustrate the new artistic formula, but the gradual dissolution of the old one. The structural contradictions of the text are the necessary reflections of the search for a fresh technique. From this point of view, the typographic arrangements do not seem mere caprices or illusory innovations, but a personal meditation on verse as a means of expressing a poetic vision.

THE OTHER poems in the volume confirm this view. There are only a few instances of traditionally organized poems. The rest of them are typographically rearranged, but the method is totally adapted to each case and any attempts at generalization are liable to limit themselves to the sheer enumeration of seemingly ordinary techniques without revealing their contextual importance. Each poem can be seen as a new meditation on verse, as a new experiment with it, and as a new stage in the progress towards an original artistic form.

A very interesting aspect concerning the whole structure of the poem is noticeable in *La poarta celor care dorm* (At the gate of those who slumber). The poem consists of four parts of unequal size, markedly separated by three rows of dots, and each part is made up of unequal groups of lines. The division of

the regular lines follows the principles applied in the first poem. Their reconstruction reveals a very irregular system of rhymes which does not enable the reader to identify the stanzas and which makes connections far beyond the graphical boundaries. The rhymes connect lines separated by meaning and graphical marks. As a result, the tension between the semantic structure and the prosodic pattern increases. The typographical rearrangement is a means of breaking the connections established by the rhymes, altering at the same time the rhythm which their appearance generates. The clash between graphical form and the underlying structure is dramatically highlighted by the rows of dots, which firmly separate what the versification unites. No matter how simple its means, the typographic revolution is still a revolution. It stages the poet's strife for a personal prosodic formula to suit the content he wants to express.

The degrees of departure from rhymed verse differ from one poem to the next, confirming the idea that this volume is a sort of laboratory in which the obsolete forms become the object of a series of experiments. Gradually, starting with the abandonment of the stanza, moving from the systematic obstruction of rhyme to its partial suspension, continuing with the introduction of fragments of lines which do not fit any pre-established pattern, the poet reaches the point when he gives up the regular beat and draws closer to what is commonly called free verse. An example of this would be *Spre insula enigmă* (Towards the enigmatic island) in which regular lines can be divined only sporadically. Rhymes are randomly distributed, when they do not disappear entirely, the rhythm changes very often and the text gives the impression of almost complete prosodic freedom.

The confrontation between the visual organization of lines and the background structure, which is identifiable even in those poems whose reconstruction does not indicate any breach of the traditional versification, is mirrored by the theme of many poems. The first one focuses on the "newcomer" who proclaims himself the harbinger of the new art. Nevertheless, his apparel and speech show him to be the last representative of a dying world. His eyes "Full of regrets and sadness" (Plini de regrete și tristeți) are "candles burning in the crypt of the dead poets" (candle aprinse în cripta morților poeți), he is coming from the world of "the last song" (Din lumea ultimului cântec), he is wearing broken sandals and an old Apollonian toga, he demands to be crowned with laurels and wants to lead the way to the accompaniment of "the song of golden lyres" (cântul lirelor de aur). All these symbols leave no room for doubt about the artistic view he shares. It is the ideal art of harmony and of beauty, yet bearing visible marks of decay. The novelty of his vision proves to be ambiguous. He appears more inclined to revive the declining art, whose last representative he

seems to be, than to promote a totally new formula, and at the same time, he distances himself from the practice of his contemporaries who seem to write poems devoid of poetic spirit: “And you who use the verse to measure immeasurable thoughts” (Iar voi ce măsu-rați cu versul gândirile ce n-au măsură). The ideals of the old poets no longer move them, but they continue to set in motion the constraining mechanism of versification, even if it has become totally devoid of meaning and entirely inadequate for the current poetic needs. Nevertheless, the newcomer’s poems show that he is conscious of the impossibility of returning to a past technique. The renewal should take another form, which is not known to him at present. Thus, he remains trapped between the faded ideal and the necessity for innovation. It is not a simple coincidence that the volume contains numerous poems which serve as an *ars poetica* and whose recurrent symbols refer to disharmony and decline. For instance, the poet imagines himself as the owner of a garden—a symbol of his poetry—inhabited only by the dead and where he invites another seeker of “delirious harmonies” (armonii smintite) (*La poarta celor care dorm*). The golden lyre of the “newcomer” goes out of tune whenever he tries to play one of his *Songs for Later*. His song is funeral: “Sing the beauty buried by those/ Who could not revive it in verse,/ . . ./ And in your songs bury/ All the ancient gods!” (Cântați frumosul îngropat de-acei/ Ce n-au putut să-l renvieze-n vers, / . . ./ Și-n cântecele voastre îngropați/ Toți vechii zei!; *Romanța marilor dispăruți*/The song of the great departed), strident: “the song of the broken lyres” (cântul țiterelor sparte; *Romanța noastră*/Our song) or barely audible: “Three faint strains of the guitar” (Trei stinse-acorduri de chitară!...; *Romanța celor trei romanțe*/The song of the three songs). His self-descriptions are very eloquent: “I am/ The drop of wine vanishing from empty glasses/ And the song unfinished because of broken bows” (Eu sunt/ Stropul vinului ce scade prin pahare deșarte/ Și romanța nesfârșită, căci arcușele s-au frânt!; *Romanța zilelor de ieri*/The song of bygone days). The impossible song is also a recurrent theme of his love poems: “The strings of the guitar are broken/ And... the song is over!” (Strunele ghitarei-s rupte/ Și... romanța s-a sfârșit!; *Romanța fără muzică*/Song without music); “It was a dream,/ A melody,/ Which maybe we have never sung...” (A fost un vis,/ Un vers,/ O melodie,/ Ce n-am cântat-o, poate, niciodată...; *Celei care pleacă*/To the one who is leaving); “O!... What sound of a hoarse and broken bell” (O!... Ce glas de clopot spart și răgușit!...; *Celei învinse*/To the defeated one); “Under what always closed and curtain-covered windows/ Did you forever bury my song?” (Sub ce ferestre-n veci închise și cu perdelele lăsate/ Mi-ați îngropat de-a pururi cântul?; *Romanța amantelor de ieri*/The song of the mistresses of yesteryear). Moreover, five poems entitled *Song without Music* appear at quite regular intervals

in the second part of the volume. All these elements confirm the idea suggested by the typographical arrangement, namely, that this volume is a record of the necessary quests of the poet who arrives at a turning point.

Minulescu's poetry joined the contemporary search which led to the widespread adoption of free verse and to a new perspective on traditional versification. In his history of Romanian poetry, Mircea Scarlat identifies the deeper reasons for the orientation towards free verse at the beginning of the 20th century and illustrates the process with the work of the other representative symbolist poet—George Bacovia. According to the critic, the popularity of free verse was not a matter of conformity to literary fashion but of increasing awareness of the function of versification, whose initial vocation had been lost over time owing to the mechanical employment of prosodic rules regardless of content. Free verse came to indicate that the original intent of prosody was not only to offer a purer model of the possibilities of language, but also to adjust itself to a particular experience and capture its transience. Therefore, the reform did not involve the replacement of traditional verse by the free one, but their coexistence in light of the new perspective. But this process began with the dramatic fall of a poetic form, which deeply affected poets like Bacovia, whose poetry reflected “the agony of traditional prosody”: “The above mentioned ‘trial’ of Verse first created a crisis situation, and Bacovia fell victim to it... Bacovia did not find the remedy for the crisis, but this crisis engendered a unique poetic work in our literature.”¹² Bacovia's use of free verse (in which Gáldi identified traces of the traditional meter) is not the result of a deliberate choice but of the realization that “Verse is a way of enclosing the speech just as the walls enclose a space, conveying the impression of death.”¹³

Despite the comprehensive approach to Bacovia's work, the critic firmly refuses to acknowledge that Minulescu had any contribution to the renewal of versification. The only comments on this aspect are to be found in two footnotes: “the spectacular ‘reform’ made by Minulescu proves to be an apparent change, resulting from the typographical fragmentation of traditional verse”¹⁴; the second remark is meant to contrast his poetry with Bacovia's: “What a difference between Bacovia and Minulescu! The latter always finds an oasis of tranquility—Verse—, even if he fragments it typographically . . .”¹⁵ In fact, both of them contributed to the search for new forms which was launched by the symbolist trend at the beginning of modernity. According to a contemporary theoretician, “Modern heroism consists of the refusal of the device which should lead to the place of the event” and in the rejection of the “pre-eminence of any form over consciousness.”¹⁶ In the context of prosodic dissolution, the two poets begin to realize that, as Laurent Jenny says, “Between the subjective refusal of any given form and the application of traditional metric formulas, there is,

however, space for the invention of some new devices which, in every circumstance of speech, represent both the singularity of an intention and the exteriority of a form.¹⁷ But Minulescu neither refuses nor exactly applies the traditional versification. He questions it and reveals its weaknesses. Also, he does not come up with a solution to the crisis, despite seeking one. Before using free verse and even without using it intensely, Minulescu's poetry reveals the awareness of a wider issue at stake—the role of *Verse*. This growing awareness is reflected by the underlying reasons for superimposing an anaphoric order upon a prosodic one. The superimposition is in fact the perfectly adequate device for exhibiting both the crisis of traditional versification and his search for a new form. From this perspective, Minulescu is, just like Bacovia, the creator of a unique work in Romanian poetry.

□

Notes

1. Tudor Vianu, *Opere* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1973), 3: 152.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Vladimir Streinu, *Versificația modernă (studiu istoric și teoretic asupra versului liber)* (Bucharest: Ed. pentru Literatură, 1966), 204.
4. *Ibid.*, 206.
5. *Ibid.*, 204.
6. *Ibid.*, 205–206.
7. Dumitru Micu, *Început de secol (1900–1916): Curente și scriitori* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1970).
8. Dumitru Micu, *Modernismul românesc (De la Macedonski la Bacovia)* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984), 1: 161.
9. Ladislau Gáldi, *Introducere în istoria versului românesc* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1971).
10. Mihaela Mancaș, *Limbajul artistic românesc în secolul XX* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică, 1991), 127–128.
11. All the following quotations of poems are taken from Ion Minulescu, *Opere*, vol. 1 (*Poezii*), ed. Emil Manu (Galați: Porto-Franco, 1995).
12. Mircea Scarlat, *Istoria poeziei românești*, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984), 330.
13. *Ibid.*, 325.
14. *Ibid.*, 235.
15. *Ibid.*, 328.
16. Laurent Jenny, *Rostirea singulară*, trans. Ioana Bot (Bucharest: Univers, 1999), 133.
17. *Ibid.*, 134.

Abstract

Towards Free Verse by Way of Ion Minulescu's Poetry

Ion Minulescu remains a controversial character in the history of Romanian literature, as the poet who promoted the symbolist trend in our poetry, who revived Romanian poetic language at the beginning of the 20th century, liberating it from the excesses of the promoters of traditional literature and from the imitation of Eminescu's work, but who nonetheless, at least according to a large number of critics, remained a mediocre artist. The present analysis is meant to reveal certain hidden depths of Minulescu's work, indicating how in his poetry the graphical arrangement of semantic units revives latent meanings and creates a new rhythmical pattern which often eclipses the rhythm of traditional verse, to the extent that the result can be termed free verse since it does not obey any rules concerning the regular beat, rhyme or the number of syllables. However, precisely when the liberation is about to become complete, traditional verse reappears and restores its own order. This clash between two possible ways of organizing the poem reflects not only the theme of the conflict between the old art and the new perspective advocated by the newcomer, but also Minulescu's own vision on poetry. Thus, his work comes to illustrate not so much the new artistic formula, but the gradual dissolution of the old one.

Keywords

Romanian poetry, symbolism, Ion Minulescu, free verse, prosody, traditionalism in art