

The Body in Ruins: Echoes of the First World War in Modern and Avant-Garde Aesthetics

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Abstract:

This article explores how the tragic experience of the First World War profoundly transformed artistic representations of the human body in modern and avant-garde aesthetics, particularly within Romanian literature and European visual arts. The war's devastating impact gave rise to a crisis of corporeality, reflected in disfigured, fragmented, and vulnerable depictions of the body. Such visual representations were conveyed through radical images of the body in the (radical) modern and avant-garde aesthetics. The vulnerability of the human body was linked to the catastrophic consequences of the war experience.

Romanian avant-garde writers such as Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca or Ion Vinea, alongside European artists like Otto Dix or George Grosz, responded with radical imagery that challenged traditional forms and expressed the psychological trauma of a disenchanted age.

Through a close reading of Alexandru Daia's war diary *Eroi la 16 ani*, the article illustrates the visceral experience of war and the bodily suffering it entailed, linking it directly to avant-garde motifs of chaos, decay, and existential crisis. The article argues that war led to a shift in both literature and art, where the body became a central symbol of fractures of modernity, bridging the realms of personal trauma and collective aesthetic revolt.

The horrors of the war, coupled with the radical artistic responses from avant-garde writers, underscore the fragility of the human body and its enduring vulnerability, marking a significant shift in the understanding of corporeality in modern artistic expressions.

Keywords: Romanian avant-garde, modernity, First World War, vulnerability, corporeality

The tragic war, the generator of a human body crisis

The tragic experience of the First World War radically influenced the representations of the human body in modern and avant-garde art across Europe, including Romania. Thus, this period saw the emergence of a recurring theme: the crisis of vulnerable corporeality. The 20th

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century was intensely preoccupied with the human body, to the extent that visual artists explored and sought to depict various radical images of the body, while in literature, writers echoed the modern atmosphere of the period in their texts. More precisely, the tragic aftermath of the first global conflagration led to real crises of humanity, which resonated within the artistic and literary fields of the period that concerns us in this article.

Deconstructed, disfigured, and traumatized human figures, eviscerated, fragmented, and decomposed bodies – all of these became a new source of artistic and poetic material in 20th-century literature. Accordingly, in Romanian avant-garde writing, we observe the resonance of radical imagery in poems belonging to Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca, Geo Bogza, Gherasim Luca, and Virgil Teodorescu.

Among the many consequences of the First World War was the physical experience of mass mortality, “a bodily experience [...] that translated into mass death” (Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello, 2009: 490) [trad. mea]¹, which led to the intensification of a crisis that manifested most acutely on an aesthetic level. One of the foremost theorists of Romanian avant-garde literature, Ion Pop, highlights in *Avangardismul poetic românesc*, that this era was marked by “the grave events of war, with their disastrous and chaotic consequences [...] which would trigger a latent revolt, pushing it to its most extreme limits” (Pop, 1969: 153) [trad. mea]². This revolt, in turn, gave rise to a pervasive existential anxiety expressed in both interwar visual art and the literary output of Romanian avant-garde writers.

The crisis of corporeality emerges as a direct consequence of the traumatic experiences of early 20th-century warfare, which shattered conventional frameworks and gave rise to unfamiliar, unsettling imagery: “Every experience of war is, above all, an experience of the body. In war, bodies both enact and endure violence” (Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello, 2009: 329) [trad. mea]³. Thus, the horrors of the First World War left profound echoes in the artistic imagination, manifesting in multiple ways as a crisis of the body, through depictions that are „dismembered, disarticulated, mutilated, with faces disfigured and massacred” (*Ibidem*: 490) [trad. mea]⁴.

Avant-garde and war. The violent subversion of tradition

We observe a violent rupture from traditional poetical texts and from the system of conventions that preceded modernism, conventions

¹ Romanian: „Experiența corporală [...] care s-a tradus printr-o mortalitate în masă”.

² Romanian: „Evenimente grave ale războiului, cu consecințele sale dezastruoase și haotice [...] care vor declanșa o revoltă latentă, dezvoltând-o până la limitele extreme”.

³ Romanian: „Orice experiență de război este înainte de toate o experiență a corpului. În război, corpurile exercită violență și tot ele o îndură”.

⁴ Romanian: „Dezmembrate, dezarticulate, mutilate, chipuri desfigurate și masacrate”.

with which we may have been familiar, as readers. In the introductory study to the anthology *Avangarda literară românească*, Marin Mincu asserts that the poetics of the Romanian avant-garde brought about “a profound transformation in the way literature is conceived and structured” (Mincu, 1983: 5) [trad. mea]⁵. The attention now shifts toward corporeality, captured through states of conflict and contradiction, through “crises, dramas, and personal experiences” (Marino, 2000: 168) [trad. mea]⁶, elements that appear prominently in the poetic texts of Romanian avant-gardists, especially in the works of Tristan Tzara and Ilarie Voronca.

Ilarie Voronca encapsulates some of these ideas in his 1925 programmatic text *Surrealism și integralism*: “Especially since the war, Europe has undergone continuous turmoil” (Mincu, 1983: 566) [trad. mea]⁷. We can infer that the Romanian writer refers to the deeply negative impact the global conflagration had on the European continent, including political, economic, and social consequences, marked by “the countless sufferings caused by the bloody tragedy of twentieth-century violence” (Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello, 2009: 9) [trad. mea]⁸. In both visual arts and literature, we witness major transformations, with striking imagery, dominated by representations of the vulnerable human body. Consequently, the lyrical discourse of the avant-garde movements presents a full spectacle of the modern human form, through “scandalous or exhibitionist images” (Pană, 1969: 17) [trad. mea]⁹, frequently represented in poetic texts.

Another key reference for our analysis is Sașa Pană’s anthology, in which he notes that “just as the vanguard of an army prepares the path for action, the literary avant-garde paves the way for the emergence of new artistic structures, subverting the old ones” (*Ibidem*: 6) [trad. mea]¹⁰. Thus, the poetic material assimilated by avant-garde writers is unpredictable and unconventional, and their representations of the body are imbued with radical visions that enact revolt, rejection, and a break from traditional foundations. These dynamics were also fueled by the dramatic consequences of the First World War, as suggested by Ion Pop in the preface to *Șapte manifeste DADA cu câteva desene de Francis*

⁵ Romanian: „Schimbare profundă în modul de a concepe și de a structura obiectul literaturii”.

⁶ Romanian: „Crize, drame și experiențe personale”.

⁷ Romanian: „De la război mai ales, Europa a trecut prin frământări continue”.

⁸ Romanian: „Nenumăratele suferințe pricinuite de tragedia sângeroasă a violențelor secolului XX”.

⁹ Romanian: „Imagini scandaloase sau exhibiționiste”.

¹⁰ Romanian: „Tot așa cum avangarda unei armate pregătește intrarea în acțiune, avangarda literară ar pregăti instaurarea unor noi structuri artistice, subminându-le pe cele vechi”.

Picabia. Lampisterii. Omul aproximativ. Pop further states that the avant-garde emerges during “a historical moment of profound spiritual crisis, exacerbated by the tragedy of the First World War” (Tzara, 1996: VII) [trad. mea]¹¹. This tragic context, as highlighted by Ion Pop, generates dense visual representations of the body as an “anatomical prison” (*Ibidem*: XV) [trad. mea]¹², vulnerable and therefore in crisis.

In *Notă despre arta neagră*, from *Lampisterii*, Tristan Tzara captures the avant-garde impulse with the imperative: “Let us deform. Let us boil” (*Ibidem*: 62) [trad. mea]¹³, emphasizing the need to expose the perishable, vulnerable nature of the human body.

To better understand the phenomenon of the avant-garde in Romania, we have also considered the perspectives of other critics, including Adrian Marino, Alexandru Mușina, and Gabriela Duda. Each of them proposes a set of features that define and distinguish the Romanian avant-garde movements. In *Biografia ideii de literatură*, Adrian Marino claims that the “antiliterature is the direct expression of the negative spirit in literature” (Marino, 2000: 190) [trad. mea]¹⁴, while Alexandru Mușina, in *Paradigme moderne*, proposes the concept of “poetry of negativity” (Mușina, 2004: 102) [trad. mea]¹⁵, suggesting that avant-garde poetry can be read through this lens. Both Ion Pop, in *Avangardismul poetic românesc*, and Gabriela Duda, in *Literatura românească de avangardă*, analyze the concept of “crisis of literature” (Duda, 1997: 11) [trad. mea]¹⁶. These concepts, *poetry of negativity*, *antiliterature* and *crisis of literature* can be perceived as complementary. As such, the *crisis of literature* can be closely linked to the poetic texts of avant-garde writers, as they reveal rich representations of a body in crisis, in “ruins”, a concept that ultimately manifests as a tension within the realm of imagery.

Recalling the war experience: *Eroi la 16 ani* by Alexandru Daia

To better understand the tragic experience of the First World War, we will analyze several illustrative fragments from the war diary of professor and publicist Alexandru Daia, *Eroi la 16 ani. Însemnările unui fost cercetaș: Jurnal de război (1916–1918)*. Although the text stands apart from the avant-garde movements, it serves as a resource for grasping the direct, unfiltered experience of war. Through its depiction of

¹¹ Romanian: „Moment istoric de profundă criză spirituală, agravată de tragismul Primului Război Mondial”.

¹² Romanian: „Închisoare anatomică”.

¹³ Romanian: „Să deformăm. Să fierbem”.

¹⁴ Romanian: „Antiliteratura este manifestarea directă a spiritului negativ în literatură”.

¹⁵ Romanian: „Poezie a negativității”.

¹⁶ Romanian: „Criză a literaturii”.

conflicting emotional states, existential anxiety, the drama of human and material loss, and the harrowing reality of war, marked by illnesses, violence, aggression, corpses, exhaustion, despair, and death, this diary offers insight into the trauma of that historical moment.

Our premise is that the war, along with its contradictions, gave rise to a series of striking and unconventional representations of the human body in European modern and avant-garde aesthetics. These were shaped by the trauma of countless wounded, mutilated, and disfigured bodies. The contradictions inherent to war contributed to the emergence of a profound crisis of corporeality, evident both in modern art and in avant-garde literary discourse, underscoring the idea of human ephemerality and perishability.

Through Alexandru Daia's war experience, one can observe how it can leave a profound psychological imprint on individuals. The notes in this diary correspond to the period during which Romania became actively involved in the First World War (1916–1918), after maintaining a position of neutrality in the initial years of the conflict (1914–1916).

The first dramatic images of the war appear in Alexandru Daia's diary note from August 1916:

The evacuation of the city gave rise to harrowing scenes. Alarmed by the onset of bombardment, the residents, groping through the darkness, carried with them small bundles of whatever they had managed to gather in their hurried departure, amidst shells and explosions. Tripping over burning beams and crumbled walls strewn across their path, they struggled to reach the train station. The elderly and the sick were carried in arms, or transported in wheelbarrows or baby carriages (Daia, 1981: 49–50) [trad. mea]¹⁷.

The sense of chaos intensifies in the diary's pages: "Now the state of war is felt ever closer to our very skin" (*Ibidem*: 51) [trad. mea]¹⁸. These fragments capture how the experience of war inflicts deep psychological trauma. The entire text is filled with haunting images of the wounded, of those lost in the chaos of the battle, and of those languishing in overcrowded hospitals, ravaged by injuries and disease.

In this context, Romanian avant-garde literature was also deeply marked by the catastrophic consequences of the war, its tragic aftermath resonating in the subtext of their literary discourse. Just as Alexandru Daia writes in his text, "This was how I first came to know the horrors of

¹⁷ Romanian: „Părăsirea oraşului a dat loc la scene dramatice. Alarmaţi de începerea bombardamentului, locuitorii, orbecăind prin întuneric, duceau cu ei câte o legăturică cu ce fuseseră în stare să adune în graba plecării, printre obuze şi explozii. Împiedicându-se de grinzi aprinse şi de ziduri căzute în drum, ajunseseră cu greu la gară. Bătrânii şi bolnavii au fost duşi pe braţe sau căraţi în câte o roabă sau în câte un cărucior de copil”.

¹⁸ Romanian: „Acum starea de război se face simţită tot mai aproape de pielea noastră”.

war” (*Ibidem*: 59) [trad. mea]¹⁹, we may assert that modern and avant-garde artists and writers were undoubtedly and profoundly impacted by such an experience.

Images of the wounded and of overcrowded hospitals are also dominant in Alexandru Daia’s text:

Women display great heroism: in the canteens, in the hospitals, where the number of wounded brought in from all fronts keeps growing, and where, from dawn until late at night, they strive to ease the pain of those in need (*Ibidem*: 57) [trad. mea]²⁰.

The wounded body, marked by suffering, is a recurring motif in avant-garde poetic imagery as well, emerging as a central figure of the vulnerable human.

Another fragment that revolves around the image of the wounded and the overflowing hospitals is:

I never imagined that stepping into the hospital would expose me to such a harrowing spectacle. You would have thought of yourself on the front lines, after a devastating battle. All the hallways had become impassable, crammed with stretchers loaded with the injured. When and from where had they all been brought so quickly? I don’t know. But there was not a single spot left to step. Pallid faces contorted by pain, bloodied heads, broken arms and legs, gaping wounds like great torn-open mouths, flesh ripped apart, intestines spilling from abdomens like strips of cloth. A vision of hell (*Ibidem*: 60) [trad. mea]²¹.

This excerpt is saturated with striking visual imagery, evoking a visceral, an anatomic spectacle of the vulnerable body: *the wounded – pallid faces – pain – bloodied heads – broken limbs – open wounds – torn flesh – intestines – abdomen*. Moreover, the accumulation of evocative adjectives paints a picture of a body in crisis and contributes to the infernal representation of war: *harrowing – devastating – pallid – contorted – bloodied – broken – torn – shredded*. Thus, this fragment

¹⁹ Romanian: „Așa am cunoscut prima oară ororile războiului”.

²⁰ Romanian: „Femeile dau dovadă de eroism: la cantine, în spitale, unde numărul răniților aduși de pe toate fronturile este tot mai mare și unde de dimineață, din zori, până noaptea târziu, se străduiesc să aline durerile celor lipsiți”.

²¹ Romanian: „Nu mi-am închipuit că intrând în spital voi avea un spectacol înfrorător. Te credeați pe front, după o luptă nimicitoare. Toate culoarele deveniseră impracticabile, fiind înțesate de târgi pline cu răniți. Când și de unde fuseseră aduși acești răniți atât de repede? Nu știu. Dar nu mai puteai pune piciorul pe niciun loc. Figuri livide sau crispate de durere, capete sângerânde, mâini și picioare rupte, răni deschise care arătau ca niște guri mari sfârtecate, carne sfâșiată, intestine atârând afară din abdomen ca niște zdrențe. O imagine de infern”.

exemplifies the “brutal deformations” (De Micheli, 1968: 131) [trad. mea]²² inflicted by the tragic realities of the First World War.

The body marked by suffering is depicted in Alexandru Daia’s text through a fragment mentioning an almost endless number of those who were wounded: “More wounded were brought in. The line of those waiting to enter the hospital courtyard seemed endless” (Daia, 1981: 60) [trad. mea]²³.

Furthermore, another relevant excerpt suggests the fragility and vulnerability of the human body:

I will never forget the shocking impression, through its tragedy, that a little girl of 9 or 10 years old made on me – fainting, or perhaps dead – brought with other wounded on a platform truck, a truck with horses. The little girl had a leg broken below the knee; a leg that was held together only by a single black cotton sock she wore. Like logs thrown haphazardly into a pile, that’s how these wounded had been brought in, hastily gathered from the places where bombs had fallen on a crowd of peaceful, unsuspecting civilians, unaware of the danger that awaited them (*Ibidem*) [trad. mea]²⁴.

Thus, the unforgiving reality of war is conveyed through its cruelty, which has an inevitable and major impact on humanity, as a witness to all the grim events and unimaginable, horrifying scenes. This excerpt emphasizes the concept of “the body” as an “object that can decompose” (Jeudy, 1998: 17) [trad. mea]²⁵, being perishable, fragile, vulnerable.

In the subsequent sections of Alexandru Daia’s book, several fragments evoke the image of a spectacle of human suffering, offering the reader numerous details of the wounds found on the vulnerable bodies of soldiers:

A multitude of soldiers, bearing horrific wounds caused by dum-dum bullets – used frequently by some of the enemies, despite being prohibited by international conventions – crowded the hospital. In the early days, the surgeons struggled to cope with the overwhelming number of wounded who required urgent surgical

²² Romanian: „Deformările brutale”.

²³ Romanian: „Aduceau alți răniți. Șirul celor care își așteptau rândul să intre în curtea spitalului nu se mai sfârșea”.

²⁴ Romanian: „N-am să uit impresia zguduitoare, prin tragismul ei, pe care mi-a făcut-o o fetiță de 9–10 anișori, leșinată, sau poate moartă, adusă cu alți răniți, pe un camion platformă, un camion cu cai. Fetița avea piciorul rupt mai jos de genunchi, picior care nu se mai ținea decât într-un fir de ciorap negru de bumbac, cu care era încălțată. Ca niște bușteni aruncați claie peste grămadă, așa fuseseră aduși acei răniți, adunați în grabă de pe locurile unde căzuseră bombele în plină mulțime, populație pașnică, neștiutoare de primejdia care o păștea”.

²⁵ Romanian: „Obiect ce se poate descompune”.

intervention. Many of those brought in from the front lines already had extensive and advanced gangrene (Daia, 1981: 71) [trad. mea]²⁶.

This paragraph conveys not only the high number of wounded in October 1916, but also a medical system strained to the point of near collapse under the weight of this tragic toll. The description also includes references to necrosis of body parts, through phrases such as extensive and advanced gangrene, indicating that “the disease becomes repugnant ‘when it destroys the organism through decomposition’” (Rosenkranz, 1984: 272) [trad. mea]²⁷. We may thus identify the way the wound takes on a pathological character:

The gangrene in the wounded arm was too advanced for any operation to have a chance of success. Any attempt was deemed futile, especially since it would have wasted the precious time of those who could instead operate and save other lives, with significantly greater chances of success. Soldiers with lighter wounds, and without gangrene, were expected and required to be operated on first, since they could be saved and quickly recovered (Daia, 1981: 71) [trad. mea]²⁸.

The tragic nature of this reality is heightened by the fact that some severely wounded soldiers had to face their impending death with resignation, as the following excerpt suggests: “Dr. Bruteanu, moved by the pleading face of the young soldier who realized he had been abandoned – and indeed he had, abandoned and condemned to certain death, which would follow shortly” (*Ibidem*) [trad. mea]²⁹. Moreover, a note dated October 16, 1916, underscores the tragic toll of war upon the fragile human body, caught in a prolonged state of agony in the hospital: “We go from hospital to hospital. In Bucharest, nearly all 15,000 beds are occupied” (*Ibidem*: 81) [trad. mea]³⁰.

²⁶ Romanian: O mulțime de soldați, cu răni îngrozitoare, datorate gloanțelor dum-dum, pe care unii dintre dușmani le folosesc adeseori, deși convențiile internaționale le opresc, împănară spitalul. Cu greu, în primele zile, chirurgii au putut face față mulțimii de răniți care trebuiau operați cu precădere. Mulți dintre răniți, aduși din primele linii de luptă, veneau cu mari cangrene foarte avansate”.

²⁷ Romanian: „Boala devine scârboasă «când distruge organismul prin descompunere»”.

²⁸ Romanian: „O cangrenă a brațului rănit era prea avansată ca să se mai încerce o operație cu șanse de reușită. Orice încercare se socotea inutilă, mai ales că ar fi răpit degeaba timpul prețios al celor care operau și salvau, cu șanse sporite, alte vieți. Soldații cu răni mai ușoare, și fără cangrene, trebuiau și se cerea să fie operați mai întâi, pentru că puteau fi salvați și repede recuperați”.

²⁹ Romanian: „Doctorul Bruteanu, mișcat de figura rugătoare a tânărului soldat, care se vedea părăsit – și chiar așa era, părăsit și condamnat la moarte sigură, moarte care ar fi urmat în scurt timp”.

³⁰ Romanian: „Mergem din spital în spital. În București, cele 15 000 paturi sunt aproape toate ocupate”.

The experience of the First World War is also documented through the lens of illness, as Alexandru Daia notes in an entry dated December 14, 1916, referencing a scabies outbreak: “Scabies! Scabies? We cry out. How can this be?” (*Ibidem*: 122) [trad. mea]³¹. Moreover, we observe how illness accentuates “weakness [...], the passivity of endurance and suffering” (Rosenkranz, 1984: 177) [trad. mea]³², a notion suggested by the human sense of helplessness in the face of disease: “We feel humiliated, though we bear no guilt” (Daia, 1981: 122) [trad. mea]³³.

Alongside this idea, the text also presents details of the direct association between corporeality and the pathological, rendered in a tone of exasperated frustration: “It is plain beyond doubt that these lice have a particular predilection for our flesh and blood” (*Ibidem*: 123) [trad. mea]³⁴.

Beyond scabies, another agonizing facet of the war experience is captured in the outbreak of epidemic typhus, which Daia documents in a fragment from the spring of 1917. Despite being a time when physicians were “caught off guard” by this unfamiliar disease, whose symptoms were initially undefined, Daia recounts the way “in the first few days, they did not know what diagnosis to give. It was something new. The virus was unknown, as were the manifestations of the illness and the means of combating it” (*Ibidem*: 171) [trad. mea]³⁵.

The tragic impact of this disease, as portrayed by Daia, is conveyed through detailed descriptions of an epidemic that ravaged large swathes of the population, spreading “with lightning speed, even to the most hidden places” (*Ibidem*) [trad. mea]³⁶. The devastating consequences of this plague illustrate the precarious condition of the human body, “subject to a constant threat of dissolution and death, as only the state of illness can induce in the traumatized individual” (Glăvan, 2014: 161) [trad. mea]³⁷.

The reference to Alexandru Daia’s diary is especially relevant here, as it offers an authentic and highly detailed depiction of the war experience, and of the psychological trauma inflicted by such a conflict. Referring to epidemic typhus as a “terrible, deadly disease, brought on by war. A disease of misery, of poor hygiene, and of weakened,

³¹ Romanian: „Râie! Râie? strigăm noi. Cum se poate?”.

³² Romanian: „Slăbiciunea [...], pasivitatea îndurării și suferinței”.

³³ Romanian: „Ne simțim umiliți, fără să fim vinovați cu ceva”.

³⁴ Romanian: „Se vede, fără puțință de tăgadă, că păduchii aceștia au mare predilecție pentru carnea și sângele nostru”.

³⁵ Romanian: „N-au știut în primele zile ce diagnostic să pună. Era ceva nou. Nu se cunoștea nici virusul, nici manifestările bolii și nici mijloacele de combatere”.

³⁶ Romanian: „Cu iuțea fulgerului până în cele mai ascunse locuri”.

³⁷ Romanian: „Aflată sub semnul unei continue amenințări a disoluției și morții, așa cum numai starea maladivă îi poate induce celui traumatizat”.

distressed bodies, just like ours now, in the midst of war” (Daia, 1981: 172) [trad. mea]³⁸, we find yet another argument supporting the central hypothesis of this analysis: namely, that the context of the First World War, with its tragic consequences, generates a radicalized vision of the human being, and implicitly, of the human body.

The avant-garde writers, influenced (whether directly or indirectly) by the experience of the First World War, draw upon the consequences of this calamitous period to shape a new poetic material. In doing so, they construct an entire spectacle of vulnerable, pathological, and even cadaveric corporeality. We establish these connections between Alexandru Daia’s diary and avant-garde texts because war embodies chaos, anarchy, and contradiction, key terms frequently associated with the avant-garde movements, which were, in many ways, catalyzed by the war itself.

One of the defining elements of war, as previously mentioned, is chaos. This is illustrated in Daia’s account of a catastrophe on January 5, 1917, when a train derailed due to “brakes that no longer worked and an overloaded weight” (*Ibidem*: 140) [trad. mea]³⁹. Alexandru Daia captures the scene of the wounded and mutilated victims:

There were apocalyptic scenes. My uncle [...] spoke to me of the victims who screamed, howled, or merely groaned in terror among the wreckage of the train. Some were injured, others trapped between splintered remains and unable to move. All of them pleaded with their rescuers to free them from the heap of wood and iron in which they were caught, like a trap from which there was no escape, and from the flames that had engulfed the remnants of the train (*Ibidem*) [trad. mea]⁴⁰.

This entire spectacle of the vulnerable body, subjected to external forces, also captures the despair of those involved, reinforcing the idea that their corporeality is marked by the “precariousness of being” (Tzara, 1996: XV) [trad. mea]⁴¹. Daia recounts:

An officer, with his leg trapped between twisted metal from which he could not escape, begged for it to be cut off with an axe below the knee, in order to escape

³⁸ Romanian: „Boală îngrozitoare, mortală, adusă de război. Boală a mizeriei, a lipsei de igienă și a organismelor slăbite și necăjite, așa cum erau și ale noastre acum în plin război”.

³⁹ Romanian: „Frânelor care nu mai funcționau și a tonajului depășit”.

⁴⁰ Romanian: „Au fost scene de apocalips. Unchiul meu [...] îmi vorbi de victimele care strigau, urlau sau numai gemeau fioros, printre sfărâăturile trenului. Unii erau răniți, alții fiind prinși printre sfărâături nu se puteau mișca. Toți implorau pe cei veniți în ajutor să-i scoată din mormanul de scânduri și fierărie în care erau prinși ca într-o capcană din care nu puteau scăpa, ca și din flăcările care cuprinseseră rămășițele trenului”.

⁴¹ Romanian: „Precaritatea ființei”.

the grip of the iron and the fire that had begun to burn the back of his uniform. Many burned alive like human torches, and no one ever learned who they had been [...]. The toll of the catastrophe was around 2,500 dead and wounded (Daia, 1981: 141) [trad. mea]⁴².

Through these infernal images, Alexandru Daia captures what Rosenkranz terms the “pathos of annihilation” (Rosenkranz, 1984: 254) [trad. mea]⁴³ of the vulnerable body. With the disintegration of corporeality comes the erasure of identity, a notion underscored by the inability to identify many of the victims after the disaster.

As we can observe, there is a multitude of excerpts focusing on the vast number of human losses incurred. Chaos and catastrophe are, inevitably, among the most devastating effects of war, giving rise to profound psychological trauma through the depiction of shocking, unflinching images of injured, destroyed, and decomposing bodies. One such effect is also outlined in an entry dated August 19, 1917:

Corporal Mușat, the one-armed soldier who, together with his grenadiers from the 51st/52nd Infantry Regiment, had wreaked havoc upon enemy lines, was struck down by a shell fragment. Second Lieutenant Georgescu I., from another infantry regiment, severely wounded in the arm, continued to lead his soldiers in the attack until he was felled by two enemy bullets that struck him in the chest (Daia, 1981: 207) [trad. mea]⁴⁴.

This part of the text thus underscores the trauma and consequences brought about by the brutal confrontations of war, effects that are intensified by human infirmity and the emergence of bodily disfigurements. These disfigurements lead to the segmentation and fragmentation of the formerly unified corporeal self.

Chaos is depicted through various fragments of the war diary, a suggestive example being an entry dated September 30, 1917. Here, we witness a buildup of details reflecting the agitation and turmoil provoked by the chaotic nature of war:

Ambulances reached the front lines, and everyone was gathering and transporting the wounded, whose numbers kept growing. Not infrequently, this rescue took

⁴² Romanian: „Un ofițer, cu piciorul prins între fiare îndoite, de unde nu puteau scăpa, ceru să i se taie piciorul cu un topor mai jos de genunchi, pentru a scăpa din strânsoarea fiarelor și a focului care începuse să-i ardă hainele în spate. Mulți au ars ca niște torțe vii și nici nu s-a mai știut cine vor fi fost [...]. Cam 2 500 de morți și de răniți a fost bilanțul catastrofei”.

⁴³ Romanian: „Patosul nimicirii”.

⁴⁴ Romanian: „Caporalul Mușat, cel fără o mână, care împreună cu grenadierii săi din regimentul 51/52 infanterie făcuse ravagii în rândurile dușmane, a căzut lovit de o schije de obuz. Sublocotenentul Georgescu I. din alt regiment de infanterie, rănit grav la braț, a continuat să-și conducă ostașii la atac, până ce a fost răpus de două gloanțe vrăjmașe, care l-au lovit în piept”.

place under enemy fire, amid the explosions of shells of all calibers and aerial bombardments (*Ibidem*: 221) [trad. mea]⁴⁵.

As in other excerpts that were cited from the diary, the visual representation of the wounded is amplified by the increasing number of casualties. In this context, medicine became more necessary than ever, as shown by the recurring depictions of hospitals and the active involvement of doctors, through surgeries and treatments. Thus, twentieth-century medicine required development, innovation, and an improvement of treatment conditions so that war victims could have a chance at recovery. In this regard, the evolution of surgical practices is illustrated in the following fragment:

I meet two great heroes of aviation: Captain Peneș (Ion) and Captain Dimitriu Adrian (nicknamed the Falcon). Both were wounded in aerial battles during the great clashes at Cașin. Retrieved from the wreckage of the planes in which they had crashed, war surgery managed – a true miracle – to reset their bones, stitch their wounds, and patch them up; in short, to restore life to them, which still faintly lingered in their bodies when they were lifted and taken to the hospital (*Ibidem*: 244) [trad. mea]⁴⁶.

This excerpt highlights the surgical procedures performed to heal the wounded. Moreover, it conveys the idea of a shattered, fragmented body restored through medical treatment, as suggested by the actions mentioned toward the end of the fragment. We thus identify the following sequence of operations performed on the human body: setting bones back in place, stitching wounds, patching, all leading to restoring life. For medicine during the First World War, these were already significant steps toward developing methods for healing and rehabilitating those wounded in the battles. Accordingly, a cumulative process leading to the restoration of life and physical recovery is highlighted, even if psychological trauma would continue to persist.

In the final part of this analysis, we focus on two excerpts that underscore the trauma caused by such a devastating conflict. One of them appears in an entry dated July 16, 1918:

⁴⁵ Romanian: „Ambulanțele ajungeau până în primele linii de luptă și cu toții culegeau și transportau răniții, în număr tot mai mare. Nu de puține ori, adunarea răniților s-a făcut sub focul inamicului, în exploziile obuzelor de toate calibrele și sub bombardamentele aviației”.

⁴⁶ Romanian: „Fac cunoștință cu doi mari eroi ai aviației: căpitanul Peneș (Ion) și căpitanul Dimitriu Adrian (supranumit Șoimul). Amândoi au fost răniți în luptele aeriene, în timpul marilor bătălii de la Cașin. Adunați dintre sfărâmurile avioanelor cu care au căzut, chirurgia de război a reușit – adevărată minune – să le pună oasele la loc, să le coasă rănilor, să-i carpească; într-un cuvânt, să le redea viața, care încă mai palpită în trupurile lor, atunci când au fost ridicați și duși la spital”.

In the no man's land between our former positions and those of the Germans, the vast plain – where fierce hand-to-hand combat once raged, and where the earth greedily absorbed the blood of tens of thousands of fallen heroes from both sides – is now covered, as far as the eye can see, by thousands of tiny candles, yellow flowers like wax torches burning at the headstones of the fallen. It is a harrowing sight. Nature, with its overwhelming force, seems determined to remind us, through the spontaneously grown flowers, that those who perished there must not be forgotten (*Ibidem*: 252) [trad. mea]⁴⁷.

Based on these selected fragments from *Eroi la 16 ani*, we can assert that the aftermath of the war undeniably generated deep psychological trauma. The shock, and therefore the trauma, is further intensified by Daia's record of the enormous number of war casualties, such as in the entry dated October 15, 1918: "The total losses since the beginning of the year, including the dead, wounded, and captured Germans, are estimated at 1,500,000 men" (*Ibidem*: 262) [trad. mea]⁴⁸. Thus, the period of the First World War marked the emergence of new poetic material, one that would give rise to literature expressing the profound traumas born from the tragic realities of war. This new poetic discourse is infused with a spirit of revolt and characterized by chaos, violence, fragmentation, contradiction, and crisis.

This concise analysis of Alexandru Daia's text aimed to highlight the trauma induced by the extreme violence of the First World War, clearly illustrating its negative effects on the human psyche. The alienating trauma experienced by individuals also triggered a crisis of embodiment, as the body is depicted in numerous vulnerable states: wounded, fragmented, afflicted, or diseased. Like any military conflict, the First World War encompasses a semantic field marked by the tragedy of war: violence, injuries, illness, suffering, bombardments, chaos, and hospitals.

Regarding the link between such a cataclysmic event and avant-garde movements, we may consider that these movements emerged from the contradictions inherent to war. Therefore, we can confidently affirm that the elements characteristic of war correlate directly with the radicalization found in the avant-garde aesthetics. This movement, in

⁴⁷ Romanian: „În *no man's land*ul dintre fostele noastre poziții și cele germane, câmpia întinsă, unde s-au dat acele înverșunate lupte piept la piept, și unde pământul a sorbit cu lăcomie sângele zecilor de mii de eroi, căzuți de amândouă părțile, mii de lumânările, flori galbene ca niște făclii de ceară aprinse la căpătâiul celor căzuți, se înalță, acoperind cât vezi cu ochii întreaga câmpie. Este o impresie răscolitoare. Natura cu forța ei biruitoare și-a pus în gând să amintească, prin florile sale crescute de la sine că cei căzuți acolo nu trebuie uitați”.

⁴⁸ Romanian: „Pierderile totale de la începutul anului, în morți, răniți și prizonieri ale germanilor sunt evaluate la 1 500 000 de oameni”.

turn, is defined by shock, crisis, violence, chaos, anarchy, automatism, and fragmentation. We may thus conclude that there exists a direct connection between the effects of the First World War and the avant-garde movements, which succeeded in crafting new and striking artistic material resonating with the traumas wrought by war.

Other examples from war memoirs

Alongside Alexandru Daia's *Eroi la 16 ani*, war memoirs undeniably encompass a considerable number of notable works. Several writers successfully captured the dramatic landscape of the First World War. Ethel Greening Pantazzi, a Canadian settled in Romania, authored *România în lumini și umbre (1909–1919)*, from which we shall quote two significant fragments that reveal the devastating effects of war on the human condition:

I drew the curtain slightly, but immediately heard a whistle from the street, an officer's warning to extinguish the lights or fully draw the curtains. Five minutes later, a powerful explosion filled our house with dust and smoke; the first bomb had destroyed the corner of a house three courtyards away. We could hear the rattle of anti-aircraft shells falling like hail on the roof. Five bombs were dropped that night (Pantazzi, 2015: 165) [trad. mea]⁴⁹.

The news from the front grows ever more alarming. Hundreds of wounded are filling the hospitals, and the Germans are concentrating their bombardments on the train stations and their surroundings [...] Gripped by panic, our soldiers fled toward the Danube in an attempt to save themselves... the Romanian defeat at Turtucaia was a dreadful massacre. As I had feared, the Germans' long-range artillery mowed down our poor soldiers... One of the questions our men keep asking is: Why are our guns not like theirs? (*Ibidem*: 170) [trad. mea]⁵⁰.

Likewise, Count de Saint-Aulaire, French ambassador to Romania in 1916, offers corroborating testimony in his *Însemnările unui diplomat de altădată în România, 1916–1920*, echoing several observations found in Alexandru Daia's text:

⁴⁹ Romanian: „Am ridicat puțin draperia, dar am auzit numaidecât un fluier din stradă, avertismentul unui polițist să stingem luminile sau să tragem draperiile. Cinci minute mai târziu o explozie puternică ne-a umplut casa de praf și fum; prima bombă dărmase colțul casei de la trei curți mai încolo. Auzeam răpăitul cartușelor tunurilor antiaeriene, ce ne cădeau ca grindina pe acoperiș. Cinci bombe au fost aruncate în acea noapte”.

⁵⁰ Romanian: „Veștile de pe front sunt tot mai îngrijorătoare. Sute de răniți umplu spitalele, iar nemții își concentrează bombardamentele asupra gărilor și împrejurimilor lor [...] Cuprinși de panică, soldații noștri au fugit spre Dunăre ca să se salveze... înfrângerea românilor la Turtucaia a fost un măcel cumplit. Cum mă temeam, tunurile cu bătaie lungă ale nemților i-au secerat pe bieții noștri soldați... una din întrebările pe care ai noștri și le pun este: De ce nu sunt și tunurile noastre ca ale lor?”.

In this overcrowded, undernourished, and devastated Moldavia, misery and famine, breeding grounds for epidemic typhus, were claiming more victims than enemy fire. In hospitals that had ceased to accept new patients, everything was lacking except dedication. There was no firewood, no linens, no bandages, no surgical instruments, no anesthetics. The wounded and the ill were begging the nurses to end their suffering, to kill them. Cries of pain drowned out the groans of the dying. Medical supplies sent from France – through negligence or sadism – were retained by Russia, which, after having unleashed all this suffering, withheld the remedies provided by others (Count de Saint-Aulaire, 2016: 106) [trad. mea]⁵¹.

The body in modern and avant-garde art

The reverberations of the tragic consequences of the First World War can be observed in early 20th-century modern art. In this part, we focus on the connections between visual art and the avant-garde movements within Romanian literature, given that the aftermath of the First World War was felt across various artistic spheres of the period.

Amid the war, Tristan Tzara initiated a revolt, noting that:

The epicenter of the cataclysm was the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, in 1916, the year when another cataclysm, orchestrated in the chanceries of embassies and by cannon manufacturers, tore through continents, rending the earth's intestines, meant to flow with blood and 30 million lives. This Europe, burning like Rome around Switzerland, found its spiritual counterpart in a youth of all nationalities, brimming with rebellion, then taking refuge in the country which, on the map, looks like a child's hand placed over the heart of the continent (Tzara, 1971: 108) [trad. mea]⁵².

Thus, the initiators of one of the major avant-garde movements were acutely aware of the immediate danger posed by the First World War, as well as of the crises, effects, and traumas it inflicted upon humanity, and upon the human body itself.

⁵¹ Romanian: „În această Moldovă suprapopulată, subnutrită, devastată, mizeria și foametea, din care ia naștere tifosul exantematic, făceau mai multe victime decât focul inamicului. În spitalele care refuzau să mai primească lume lipsea totul în afară de devotament. Lipseau lemnele, rufăria, pansamentele, instrumentele chirurgicale, lipseau anestezicele. Răniții și bolnavii le implorau pe infirmiere să pună capăt suferințelor lor, să-i ucidă. Urletele de durere acopereau gemetele muribunzilor. Materialul sanitar expediat din Franța – neglijență sau sadism – era reținut tot de Rusia, care, după ce dezlănțuise toate aceste suferințe, nu preda leacurile furnizate de alții”.

⁵² Romanian: „Epicentrul cataclismului a fost Cabaretul Voltaire din Zürich, în 1916, anul când alt cataclism, pregătit în cancelariile legațiilor și ale fabricanților de tunuri, sfârtecă prin continente intestinale de pământ prin cari trebuiau să șiroiască sângele și 30 000 000 de vieți. Această Europă care ardea ca o Romă în jurul Elveției și-a găsit pe planul spiritual corespondența într-un tineret de toate naționalitățile doldora de revoltă, refugiat atunci în țara care pe hartă pare o mână de copil așezată pe inima continentului”.

The central concept of our analysis, *the body*, is depicted in 20th-century art through a variety of representations, as it appears in forms such as the mutilated, wounded, diseased, or fragmented body, or even as a corpse. Such striking images are emblematic of the war experience. In what follows, we will offer several examples of visual representations (Teliban, 2017), through which we can observe how the visual arts became influenced by this perspective on the human body, namely, one in which the individual is portrayed as physically impaired, a suggestion of the body's inherent fragility.

An example can be found in a graphic representation by Alexandru Moscu, *Instructorii invalizi* (1917), which depicts military instruction being carried out by a disabled man. The disrupted unity of the body is made visible through the signs of infirmity, a segmented, fragmented form marked by the absence of arms. In the visual art of the 20th century, monstrous deformations of human corporeality can be observed. Disabled individuals, represented repeatedly in modern art, stand as a direct consequence of the disastrous effects of war.

Another example is the visual representation *După bombardament pe câmpul de luptă. Scenă din Războiul Mondial 1914–1918*, created by Ștefan Stoica I. Dumitrescu. As illustrated in the scene composed by the artist, the emphasis falls on one of the war's most tragic consequences: the high number of casualties. This depiction includes a multitude of human corpses, as well as dead or wounded animal bodies, an evocative suggestion of the vulnerability and the swift perishability of the body. The crisis conveyed here is precisely that of the weakened body, worn, powerless, and defenseless in the face of external forces and pressures.

While the previously mentioned paintings allowed us to observe the human body as fragmented, wounded, or destroyed in war, or even reduced to a cadaver, another visual representation introduces the image of the captive, tortured body. This is the case in Nicolae Tonitza's autobiographical work *Ofițer român prizonier. Kridjali. 1917*, a depiction that conveys one of the war's most horrifying realities, the degeneration of the body under torture.

These works incorporate various autobiographical elements, as the artists were contemporaries of the First World War and experienced, either directly or indirectly, the trauma of this devastating military conflict. In her article *Marele război al artiștilor*, published in the journal *Trenul nostru*, Andreea Teliban notes that Tonitza's painting is particularly significant from the perspective of the painter's autobiography, emphasizing that "the captive officer is depicted in a

disordered room, standing before an easel, holding a paint palette in his left hand. A prisoner-painter” (Teliban, 2017) [trad. mea]⁵³.

Alongside visual artists, writers too bore witness to the dramatic realities of war, as evidenced by the example of Alexandru Daia’s book. The avant-garde writers were likewise directly or indirectly influenced by the chaos of the World Wars.

The obsessions with the body and with the morbid have thus constituted enduring themes in Romanian and European literature, including in the movement that preceded the avant-garde, namely, Symbolism/Decadentism. It is from this earlier current that many of the avant-garde’s striking visions of corporeality originate. These representations are, consequently, transposed into the poetic universe of the writers, who, particularly in their formative years, were influenced by the Symbolist movement. This influence is evident in their inclination toward the radicalization of imagery and language, as well as in the “Symbolist spleen, the neurotic irritability, as an effect of clearly defined experiences such as illness, solitude, monotony, etc.” (Buciu, 2003: 24) [trad. mea]⁵⁴. The pre-avant-garde atmosphere in Romanian literature was therefore shaped by the Symbolist current, whose influence can be discerned in the early poetic texts of Tristan Tzara, Ilarie Voronca, and even Ion Vinea. Both Mario De Micheli, in *Avangarda artistică a secolului XX*, and Matei Călinescu, in *Conceptul modern de poezie: de la romantism la avangardă*, draw connections between the two aforementioned movements, Symbolism/Decadentism and the Avant-Garde.

Both Symbolism and the Avant-Garde exhibit a “restructuring of the perception of the body” (Dinescu, 2007: 8) [trad. mea]⁵⁵, as one may observe the transition from the conception of the “harmonious and symmetrical body of Antiquity and the Renaissance to the dislocated and dismembered bodies of the avant-garde” (*Ibidem*: 7) [trad. mea]⁵⁶. The body, though in crisis, is displayed as a spectacle and offered to the reader in order to generate a visual field that is as striking and radical as possible. Thus, it is the destroyed body that has truly experienced the “representation of the ‘disasters of war’” (De Micheli, 1968: 115) [trad. mea]⁵⁷; yet the witness to this dramatic scene is also psychically affected by the trauma of such a tragic event. War constitutes a world of

⁵³ Romanian: „Ofițerul captiv este surprins într-o încăpere dezordonată, în fața unui șevalet, cu o paletă pentru culori în mâna stângă. Un prizonier-pictor”.

⁵⁴ Romanian: „Spleenul simbolist, iritarea nevrotică, ca efect al unor trăiri precizate, ca boala, singurătatea, monotonia etc.”.

⁵⁵ Romanian: „Restructurare a percepției asupra corpului”.

⁵⁶ Romanian: „Corp armonios și simetric al Antichității și, respectiv, renașcentist, la cele dislocate și dezmembrate ale avangardei”.

⁵⁷ Romanian: „Reprezentarea «dezastrelor războiului”.

“battlefields, where weapons, barbed wire, corpses, and decaying carcasses merge into a cursed landscape” (*Ibidem*: 116) [trad. mea]⁵⁸, one that imprints itself deeply into the consciousness of the observer.

Returning to our exploration of visual representations, we shall now turn our attention to other works, this time by European artists influenced by the tragic aftermath of the First World War. These artists capture with striking intensity the sinister nature of chaotic warfare, placing particular emphasis on the vulnerability of the human body. A notable example is Otto Dix, the German visual artist who was especially preoccupied with the brutality of war. Deeply affected by the severity of the conflict and having personally experienced its realities, Otto Dix conveys this traumatic experience in his works, most notably in the 1924 etching series *Der Krieg* (*The War*).

In a 1932 painting bearing the same evocative title, *Der Krieg*, we observe the chaos wrought by such a conflict: the armed body, seemingly protected; the wounded body, ravaged by relentless battles; the corpse depicted with legs upturned, a suggestion of a disordered world, of upheaval, imbalance, and fragmentation. Dix also portrays the human skeleton, the remains of the body caught in a perpetual state of disintegration and decay. Otto Dix’s paintings thus reflect the tragic sensibility of war and, consequently, the “suffering of deformity” (Rosenkranz, 1984: 100) [trad. mea]⁵⁹, an experience also felt by avant-garde writers. War and the avant-garde are inextricably linked, and art inevitably comes to be shaped by a tragic vision of the human condition.

Another example is *The Match Seller*, from 1920, also by Otto Dix, in which we observe how the human form physically exhibits certain deformities, having been rendered an invalid as a result of the war. The seller embodies a male presence without limbs, situated on the periphery of society in the post-World War I period. The male figure in Otto Dix’s work is also found within an alienating society, his existence vehemently ignored by those around him. The world during and after the war, therefore, is one of ruin, misery, poverty, and crisis, with one of these crises being the crisis of the body.

Otto Dix created a multitude of visual works that embody the theme of war, and the examples presented in this preliminary chapter contribute to shaping an overarching perspective on the dramatic scenario of this conflict.

The writer and artist Ruth Hartley examines the visual works of Otto Dix in an article discussing the German artist’s pieces that depict the theme of war. One of the first examples she mentions is *The Skat*

⁵⁸ Romanian: „Câmpurilor de bătălie, unde arme, rețele de sârmă ghimpată, cadavre și stârvuri în putrefacție se amestecă într-un peisaj blestemat”.

⁵⁹ Romanian: „Suferința diformității”.

Players, in which we observe the representation of survivors from the First World War, with emphasis on their physical deformities. These figures are portrayed as grotesque, having experienced the “relentless reality” (De Micheli, 1968: 217) [trad. mea]⁶⁰ of the conflict. The images of open wounds are particularly striking, a feature also present in *In Memory of the Glorious Time*, from 1924. In this visual representation, Otto Dix conveys a reality he himself lived through, just as Alexandru Daia did when writing about his war experience, attempting to depict, much like the avant-garde writers, a world of chaos, contradictions, rupture, bodily disintegration, randomness, and anarchy.

Mario de Micheli, in *Avangarda artistică a secolului XX*, also mentions George Grosz as an illustrator of post-World War I German life, noting that “his drawings express despair, anger, resentment. He drew drunks, people vomiting, murderers, suicides. He also drew soldiers without noses, war cripples with steel arms” (*Ibidem*: 117) [trad. mea]⁶¹. A relevant example of the German artist’s work is *The Grey Man Dances*, which portrays a “soldier driven mad in a straitjacket” (*Ibidem*) [trad. mea]⁶², symbolizing a human being affected by the cruelty of war and, by extension, the traumatic consequences of such experiences.

In addition to these examples from visual art, we also mention other works that are pertinent to our analysis, several titles that highlight a crisis of the vulnerable body. This tension is, in fact, a common element that unites these works. These include the following visual representations by Otto Dix: *Dying Soldier*, *Transplantation* (1924), *Wounded Man – Autumn 1916*, *Bapaume*, and *Dead Man – St. Clement* (1924).

As evidenced by the numerous selected visual examples, as well as the specific case of Alexandru Daia’s wartime writing, the experience of war emerges as a fertile source of creative material, ripe for artistic and literary exploration. This potential was also harnessed by the avant-garde, in the sense that the artists of these radical movements were deeply influenced by the sight of mutilated, wounded, and deformed bodies, by the war cripples they encountered directly or indirectly. They sought to comprehend the inner turmoil, tensions, psychological traumas, and thus, the crises embodied by these figures.

In this regard, the destroyed bodies left in the wake of the First World War provoked shock, astonishment, and visceral impact among those who witnessed them, a response that resonates profoundly with the

⁶⁰ Romanian: „Realitatea nemiloasă”.

⁶¹ Romanian: „Desenele lui exprimând disperare, mânie, resentiment. El desena bețivani, oameni care vomitau, asasini, sinucigași. Desena, de asemenea, soldați fără nas, invalizi de război cu brațe de oțel”.

⁶² Romanian: „Ostaș înnebunit într-o cămașă de forță”.

major contradictions and subversive energies characteristic of the avant-garde movements.

Mario De Micheli asserts that:

The war of 1914, together with the social and political issues that emerged violently in the postwar period, compelled many artists to reflect on the past experience and on the figurative cultural situation as it was developing at the time (*Ibidem*: 111) [trad. mea]⁶³.

Thus, writers and visual artists alike contributed to the construction of a tragic horizon of war, shaped by “cruelty, the horrors of hunger, and social contrasts” (*Ibidem*: 129) [trad. mea]⁶⁴. These merciless realities were explored by artists and writers, serving as the foundation upon which crises and tensions could be generated and articulated.

Adrian Marino further explains:

We are witnessing the systematic contestation and overturning of the entire traditional conception of literature in all its aspects, along with the rejection of all its fundamental principles and postulates. Every form of negation is expressed with great freedom, often with extreme nonchalance, elevated even to ostentation” (Marino, 2000: 133) [trad. mea]⁶⁵.

The Romanian avant-garde fully embraces these objectives, its discourse being directly influenced by the traumatic and tragic experiences, and, by extension, the “crises, dramas, and lived experiences” (*Ibidem*: 168) [trad. mea]⁶⁶, of the war.

Conclusions

Since the avant-garde movements can be seen as belonging to the (radical) modern paradigm, the human body is no longer perceived as a fundamental value, as it was in Antiquity or the Renaissance, central, harmonious, and balanced. Instead, it is seen as a new type of body, one that undergoes the crises of modernity: fragmented, distorted, vulnerable, and wounded. As we have observed, the literature produced by representatives of the avant-garde is in direct contact with a reality

⁶³ Romanian: „Războiul din 1914, împreună cu probleme sociale și politice, violent venite la rampă în perioada postbelică, determinaseră pe mulți artiști să reflecteze asupra experienței trecute și asupra situației culturale figurative așa cum se dezvoltă ea în acei ani”.

⁶⁴ Romanian: „Cruzime, ororile foamei, contraste sociale”.

⁶⁵ Romanian: „Asistăm la contestarea și răsturnarea sistematică a întregii concepții tradiționale a literaturii, sub toate aspectele, la negarea tuturor principiilor și postulatelor sale fundamentale. Orice formă de negație este foarte liber exprimată, adesea cu o dezinvoltură extremă, valorizată până la ostentație”.

⁶⁶ Romanian: „Crizele, dramele, experiențele”.

marked by chaos, anarchy, and war. All these are elements that also resonate in the visual arts of the 20th century.

Alexandru Mușina, in *Paradigme moderne*, refers to the emergence of the concept of *crisis* as follows:

Fulfilled individualism generates three major crises, around which the entire modern culture is structured and toward the resolution of which it strives: 1) the crisis of language; 2) the crisis of the self; 3) the crisis of reality. All three crises fundamentally question the individual, the very possibility of his genuine existence (Mușina, 2004: 104) [trad. mea]⁶⁷.

Thus, the concept of *crisis of corporeality*, which highlights the body 'in ruins', is closely intertwined with the three notions identified by Alexandru Mușina, being in direct contact with the language of avant-garde discourse, with the inner tensions of 'the self', and with the tragic nature of a traumatizing reality, intensified by the dramatic context of the First World War and, consequently, by its devastating aftermath.

We can conclude that the tragic experience of the First World War undoubtedly induced a profound crisis of corporeality, of the vulnerable human body. The body is depicted as ruined, and not idealized as a whole, but wounded, fragmented, decomposed, reflecting the existential disintegration brought on by war. Both modern and avant-garde aesthetics responded to the war by rejecting traditional artistic norms, and creating works that highlighted chaos, anarchy, disjointed imagery, and absurdity.

Both visual arts and literature emphasize death, post-traumatic alienation, as well as the corporeal disintegration. Despite differences in form and medium, the trauma of war serves as a shared foundation for modernist and avant-garde artists. Literature, diaries, paintings, and graphics all converge in their depiction of the ruined, disposable, and suffering body – the human body 'in ruins'.

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⁶⁷ Romanian: „Individualismul realizat generează trei crize majore, în jurul cărora se constituie, întru rezolvarea cărora se străduiește întreaga cultură modernă: 1) criza limbajului; 2) criza eului; 3) criza realității. Toate aceste trei crize pun în discuție tocmai individul, posibilitatea existenței cu adevărat a acestuia”.

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