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## **The West as an Illusion in the Poetic Imagination of A. E. Baconsky**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims at providing an insight into the Romanian society during the first decades after the instauration of the communist regime. The main focus is on the poetry, fiction, journal and memoirs of the writer A. E. Baconsky. Until 1956 (the year when he lived a crucial turn as a poet) and on and off later, the writings of Baconsky propose but a superficial aesthetic expression (an “anti-aestheticization”) of the utopian totalitarianism. Progressively, A.E. Baconsky became aware of the aggressive success of ideology and technology, to which the Romanian artists had been subjected. In his last volumes of poetry he manifested centrifugal tendencies. His revolt is directed towards the standardization of the world, placing the artist under the sign of anti-.

### **KEYWORDS**

Romanian Literature; A. E. Baconsky; Illusion; Identity; Western vs. Eastern Civilization; European *topoi*.

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The dualism *Identity vs Otherness*, manifested both at an individual level and also at a larger level of cultures, is highly debated today, mainly from the perspective of the theory of mentalities and imagology. The European space, with all its sequences, is to be found with significations and various perspectives in the works of the contemporary Romanian writers, just like their discourse in poetry, novels or memoirs. Our intention is to approach the studies specific to the area of the imaginary in a creative manner, though the approach itself will be related to the sociology of culture and the theory of mentalities, the history of art and religion, the theory of value in culture and of comparative attitude. If the European *topoi* have always represented a fascination and an undeniable source of inspiration for our writers, then, to the same extent, the European contemporary space must long to intercut with our values.

Writers’ reactions towards the historic phenomenon of avant-garde took, in some cases, unusual forms. All the more so, the avant-garde as an aesthetic movement, beyond the undeterred structures of a reality appropriate to a cultural time, is accepted as viable in any context of highly innovative movements that begin from what has been naturalized as *culture’s crisis*. The avant-garde becomes a substitute of the perpetuated

negation... We do not have the intention to discuss the dimensions of the Romanian avant-garde – because we do not have the tools used by the great theorists validated as benchmarks for literary theory and history – but, below, we will try to bring into focus an ingenious reaction towards the avant-garde phenomenon (as ingenious as it was the entire being of the one who started it!). We make reference to the masked-disputed gesture of A.E. Baconsky, the poet of great aesthetic experiences, interpreter of the artistic movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, unequalled in certain matters.

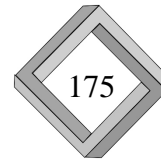
The writings of Baconsky, up to 1956 (the year of great upheavals in the aesthetic consciousness of the poet) and on and off later, propose but the superficial aesthetization formula (anti-aesthetization!) of the code of the utopian totalitarianism. Progressively, the writer A.E. Baconsky would become aware of the aggressive process of “robotisation” to which the Romanian artists had been subject to, manifesting centrifugal tendencies, which started in a spectacular way with his famous speech at the tribune of the Congress of the Writers in June 1956, when he confessed the suffocation of the clichés and revoked his own creation. Then he started his long journey to himself, an initiation for he who had left the so-called utopia to get to the core of a certain reality which would prove, at a deeper analysis, the centre of the anti-utopia. Our utopia/ counter-utopia perspective was not a mere pretext. Both the artist and the society were living together the dilemma of the research of the lost identity; only that for the Romanian society of the totalitarian period there had been made a foretelling of the concrete UTOPIA: the Marxist-Leninist ideology and its pseudo-ethical paradigm, the socialist realism.

Under these circumstances, A.E. Baconsky has a curious form of delimiting

from the radical structures of avant-garde: through the subtle practice of essences and their effects. We will not forget that in an initial phase of creation, A. E. Baconsky flirted with surrealist lyrics, therefore with an escape from tradition specific for avant-gardism. Later, Baconsky understood that the surrealism or the other fashionable forms of overturning through the revelation of culture’s crises could not provide him with the necessary freedom and lyrical equilibrium. The poet denied his vague “vanguard” performances and embraced an attitude of ironic overlap of the negation spirit over every motivation of the cultural trauma specific for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, at one point, the poet righteously believed that the rupture from the tradition and logic, the running from models, and the refuse of a good, polished aesthetics enmeshed in a system – all of which are also defining for the “healthy” avant-garde – do nothing but dissolve the art, and the artist, implicitly. At one point, in his essay about *Open Work and the Definition of Avant-garde*, included in the volume *Meridians*, A. E. Baconsky mentions that:

(...) the avant-guard is not a poetic art, but a state of mind. (...) The obsession of the radical innovation, of starting a new art, of restructuring the basic artistic principles, the obsession of the novelty, of absolute originality, etc., all these represent an extra-aesthetic phenomenon: they are psychological obsessions, not aesthetic. (*Remember I*, Baconsky 1977).

In the author’s opinion, the roller-coaster of modernity can be connected with the permanent desire of man to deny everything, to programmatically de-structure a fact, then hurrying to set in its place a false essence, a degraded form of existence that contaminates humanity to its most sensitive



structures. Baconskyan revolt, vigorously enhanced in the last volumes of poetry, is principally manifested towards the mechanisms of denial without reason, focused on the structures which have subscribed to the standardization of the world, under the sign of 'anti'; the writer's irony has a dramatic tint when he says that:

(...) the disgraceful seems to be conceived as a weapon in the protesting arsenal, associated or not with the sordid, depending on the various features of the drought... *anti-* is always expanding, annexing more and more fields to itself: after anti-poetry, anti-novel, anti-memories, etc., here are the anti-elegance, anti-costumes, anti-shoes, anti-hair. A dry lemon hanging from the neck like a medallion is just anti-jewelry... everything has its origin in the blessed need of denying... Oh, and there are so many virtual addresses waiting negation... the regret being a student no more in order to believe in the efficiency of that *NO* they say too often feeling that it will never exceed the acoustic of a glass bell... will they ever understand that?... a beautiful girl look at her reflection from a mirror maddened by the thought that all her attributes will not save her from the terrible curse to remain a beautiful girl... (*Remember I*, Baconsky 1977).

What scares the traveler-artist most is *the disease* that has contaminated the art, the unbridled deterioration of the artist's condition coming from the center of the Fortress and going towards the peripheral hypostasis. The inner mutilation of the artist, forced to subscribe to the metamorphoses of modern humanity, often goes till deformity, the place of inspiring realities being systematically taken by aesthetic surrogates obtained by transforming the most intimate

products of human spirituality (especially those in the field of art) into commercial goods. By gaining utility, the art loses its mythic presence, is desecrated through defamatory materialization. At this level, the Baconskyan sadness reaches its peak:

I am bored over my head by the concrete poetry and kinetic art... stingy technocrat freemasonry, words-object, verbal Plexiglas, Taschenrevolution, art of cybernetic robots, sufficiency and dust, huge veils of dust deposit on the words-object, on the amorphous machine of kinetic sculptures that quickly go out of fashion with the factories' moulds, while in literature and in art giant automobiles graveyards pile up... grin of old scraps exasperated by the rain... on the surface of a water I see Leonardo's image crumbling in a huge burst of laughter... (*Remember, II*, Baconsky 1977).

The writer radically denies these aspects of the new art, especially when they are sublimated and come to be extended and adopted as permanent features in the spectacle of everyday life. The subtle irony is directed towards the lamentable obsession of modern man to break down traditional values and place in the vacant space everything that may cause violence and shock the expectances of artistic experiences seeker; the Baconskyan confession is sincere:

I hate many words from the contemporary language and when I have them in my lips I spit them instead of pronouncing them... and so many institutions that have rotten in gold, in blood, in emptiness, and the demagogy of systems and ideals eaten by moths... I will die impugning, perhaps chaotic and undifferentiated, the background on



which my own existence was drawn, but for all the filth, parasitism, primitive and sordid hedonism, shocking garb prop, there are mute and pathetic replies... the world today can not be treated with such ingenuous revolts... there are countless social fresheners, social insecticides, grills, protection clothes, glasses, detergents, drugs... and who does not want to have years, may not have them, and who does not want to see, closes the eyes towards the comfortable and ultra-civilized cavern that he has built for himself, the ideal refuge for life-digestion, for visceral exultations... Oh, if I would just have the feeling of a somehow efficiency of your lifestyle, I myself would become the greatest sordid of you all, you poor bookish pithecanthropes... but I rather have a feeling of pointlessness. (*Remember*, II, Baconsky 1977).

The author of *Sebastian's Ship* is scared, perhaps more than anything, by the worsening of the art's identity crisis, unrecognized by the modern culture.

But behold, the curtain is drawn. The scene is flooded with darkness. A projector lays a circle of light on the floor. Behind the circle, seven naked men with shields and spears come into light. They stand still while the artist stands in the circle. He wears a flowered shirt and yuft boots. He cries. He has an accordion of no great size. He opens it and alternatively presses on two keys. *Sol – la, Sol – la, Sol – la*. Then, after a few minutes, remains only the note *La* and it sounds continuously. The seven men imperceptibly withdraw into the shadows until they slowly disappear. The composer's face gets an expression of revolt. And the sound

continues. After fifteen minutes some auditors leave the room quietly. The redoubtable editor strikes the key note. Later, I found out that this was the reaction expected by the artist. After a half an hour the room was empty. I alone remain obstinate. (*Corabia lui Sebastian*, Baconsky 1990: 382)

It is even worse when the artist's frondeur-avant-garde intention is replaced by a *kitsch-motivation* leading to the creation of a pale cultural product, void of *Idea*, designed by a standard exterior to aesthetic valences, but responding in force to the protocol of the machinist world. Thus, a common experience of the literary man (attending a literary circle) does not become a corollary of the aesthetic labour, but the absurd spectacle of standards, is not an exercise of contemplating the ceremony – once sacred – of artists coming together, but the participation to a rather pagan ritual, that of *catharsis* annulment:

Tonight, I will finally attend the famous literary circle. (...) A large room with ceiling inclined directly below the roof. Scholarly mess. Instead of chairs, there are old car pillows arranged on four pavement stones. In front, there are beer cases and behind them there is a girl who sells them. There is also a small podium made of cases. Above, we have a chair made of rough boards and a table made from a half of an old door. Oil lamps. Handmade tallow candles. In a corner, a heating stove is smoldering. There is an atmosphere of authoritarian discipline. Heteroclite people. Doubtful youth. Old man with an attitude of juvenile decrepitude. (...) From the group of bonzes, stands up a man; he goes on the podium and sits down. On his neck, he has a book tied with a rope. He opens the book and



reads. It is a brief anthology of programmatic literary texts. I listen to extensive excerpts from Marx, Engels, Mehring, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Gorki, Dadeev, Lunacearski. Some participants from the public come next. I was told that it is very important to be seen here. (*Corabia lui Sebastian*, Baconsky 1990)

It is not by accident that the mixture of avant-gardism and primitivism fills the Baconskyan discourse almost cinematically in terms of stitching the details. With Baconsky, all being's determinations are claimed from this obsession of the lack of communication, often with tougher shades than with Eugen Ionesco or Samuel Beckett. The unhealthy incapacity of *standing by* gives birth to people-mask, incapable of favorable metamorphoses, prone to error and suffocated till barbarity by their own frustrations:

I saw a maniac making injections to the roses  
I saw a wooden woman I saw a bourgeois  
giving lemons to the giraffe in the zoo  
I saw a teacher lurking a breed dog  
then came a long pause and an awful wind  
gave all vowels  
a U-shape and through metal tubes  
all things were trying to go back  
to their origins (...)  
and I have seen nothing else but dead birds, many  
countless dead birds around cars  
which were making love on Landhausstrasse. (*Volută monotonă*, Baconsky 1990)

Therefore, the *Abendland* is a strange Leviathan body, with attributes that define the decrepitude of humanity, surrogate-

fortress, anti-utopian, manipulated by the laws of decline that grinds the elites, as the masses, things, as their reflex in the economy of the imaginary; the transience scares no more, the passing towards pseudo-models, beyond which the perspectives become themselves utopias, was already made:

dance of the fortresses, red twilight,  
abend-  
land... the agony of villain nations  
choked in gold  
(...)  
Oh, cathedrals, Quattrocento, Baroque,  
oh, the future  
archaeological excavations in time and  
in the shadow  
of the now vanquished Apostat. (from  
*Corabia lui Sebastian*, Baconsky 1990)

In a *Prophetic Anatomy* we read: "For all of those who were not/ statues will be raised, for those who are/ will have a NO before them..." and we are really tempted to decipher a fictitious paradigm of the world, based on which *the non-created, the unborn* seem to be the only chance of refusing the rules of the absurd. The upturned sense of history is measured through an aberrant reversal of the executioner with the victim, of the cause with the effect and of becoming with stagnation.

The burlesque desecration of the world's paradigms is indispensable for building *the negation* structures. A.E. Baconsky retains just suggestions from Nietzsche regarding God's death, as motivation for the deletion of the dividing line between the natural and the unnatural, between the sacred and the profane, between normality and the absurd. Divinity does not seem to exist even as a memory, as *denied topos*; it no longer exists; its place was usurped by a series of simulacra, ranging from a god-clown, a God of NIHIL:



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God, give me again the longing for death of my ancestors

do not let me accept the weakness, rust and chain (...)

Give again my eyes the ice crystalline lens

that they have long lost, poison my arrows

and remind me the last one

to keep for me. (*The Prayer of a Dacian*),

[a hyena-God]

Oh, god of hyenas, give us new laws forever have mercy on our stars, descend in things your fetid spirit! Give to every thing many, many COUNTLESS corpses! (*Pestilential Invocation*),

[a mortified God]

God, I would like to cry but I have no river on whose banks I can remember Zion (*Black Psalm*),

[a God of emptiness]

A huge, unusual sun, seems the begged god of the fall in vacuum. One by one magnetic signals in the cities were ignited

lonely wings, lonely limbs, lonely shadows,

the piano with no pianist concerts in a room

with occult presences – the words grow, expending themselves.

(*Electronic Season*)

...and reaching, in *Sebastian's Ship*, to the hideous image of a *modernized deus ex machine* or some kind of crazy god for the

sake of and then *because of* the emptiness, a divinity giving credit to the omnipresent chaos:

God of all dominions, allow us to handcuff ourselves for no one knows about us and wants us as vassals... look, it is very late, here are a thousand owls with dark-blue eyes somebody cries or maybe whispers a groundwater not too deep somewhere and it seems that beat the drums of some chimerical executions... without dead people without victims without executioners... the measure of time is given by a ruin but time is not measured time passes with the superposed eyes that never close... (*Cosmopolis*, Baconsky 1990).

The new gods of *Abendland* are spasmodic projections of the mind sickened by false glory; the new temples of the modern man are the common places for the desecrated ritual, accidental, random intersections of the civilization's labyrinth. Hence, the impossible survival and reading in a reverse key the existence which, by defying the habits from Creation, follows the path of immersion into nothingness and not the one of tempting the absolute; life does not end in death but, in an improvised logic, it begins with it. The absence of priests, the cancellation of the state of prayer seen as a crevice of the consciousness, which devoted itself to *denying* any value, are just steps of the carnival desecration:

God of the dream, the blood has no venom anymore – the guillotine beheads bodies. a NO, maybe a NO,



is left to be voiced  
in this empty church  
where a magnetic tape  
is preaching non-stop (*Alleluia*, Baconsky 1990).

In fact, the routes of the lyrical Baconskyan discourse sketch the permanent labour of self-search, the poetic finality being nothing else than decoding the gap between civilization and culture, which the poet acutely felt in all his ages of creative destiny. Throughout his creation, the poet indulges himself in defining *the non-place*, the clear impression being that of location in a permanent space of passage. The dichotomy between the world's *white promontory* and *black promontory* (in the sense given by the end of the *Black Church* novel) discloses the poet's problematical consciousness who is not afraid to scrape his poems against the world's failure, a debunked world, fallen deep into the profane, a source of uncertainty and home to reverse utopia. Certainly, the poetic ego is a valid avatar of the character-sign from the Baconskyan prose, always looking for partial definitions ("You may sometimes see me as a bastard settled among you/ a perverse miracle suddenly appeared.."), rediscovering himself only in the hypostases of the adrift pilgrim, with the being sprayed in anxieties or saving metamorphoses: "Sometimes, in the windy weather, I think/ that the countless roads I walked on/ will all come back to me one night/ strangling me like Laokoon snakes/ maybe I would deserve such a fate/ since my feet have love/ the eternal drift...". In A.E. Baconsky's poetry, the loss of self, alienation, mythic madness, agony, isolation, ritual death through evanescence in elements, aesthetic sleep, assuming the polyvalent time become personal myths, all of them speaking about "the infusion of false" and *à rebours* religion that characterizes the black utopia spotted in the world which the

poet himself claims. In each poem, the author shows a polemic, not just ascertaining aggressiveness. "A wall, a wall everywhere..." warns the poet, as he finds out, concluding his conceptual and symbolic development, that the utopist dream is the fools' prerogative ("...Let the fools/ walk alone in search of a wither world/ for their death, leave them unpunished and free...").

In an absurd-chaotic world, the poet seems to utter that you can not defend yourself from the rollercoaster, as you can not protect yourself from time or words and enemies you do not know. Mysterious enemies, loneliness and the crisis of communication with the other, inevitably convert in chances of survival through the power of contrast.

The Baconskyan man is the man of the history; his degradation is concomitant with the degradation of history. One may *fall* from the individual destiny, just like all humanity falls through its own becoming in negative. Nothing escapes, under the Baconskyan pen, from desecration and denial, however it is interesting that by the *desecration* and *denial* of the world, the poet *instates it*, gives it a permit to go through the conscience and a kind of original, but acidic and bitter-ironic concreteness.

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