

A Profession of Faith for the Alge Group

Geo Bogza

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A Profession of Faith for the *Alge* Group*

Geo Bogza

Translator's Note

"Alge" of the title, Romanian for the marine plant "algae," was retained for the simple reason that its Latin and, ultimately, Greek etymon – not lost on educated Romanians – also means "pain." (Pain relieving "Algo-" compounds can be found on countless pharmacy labels and shelves.)

The literature of exhortation (and the exorcism of evil from oneself) is probably as old as the clay tablets of Sumer, Isocrates, Paul of Tarsus, the Church Fathers, the long Medieval line of the *Specula*, and the eighteenth century French epistolographers. Working in precisely the opposite direction, the Post-enlightenment interest in the infirm and the unadjusted provided ways of envisioning life with one's demons. Freud attributed his own and his project's formation to the classical tradition culminating in the romantics and, more specifically, in Goethe, Dickens, and Dostoevsky.

Fully coinciding with the dissemination of psychoanalysis, Geo Bogza's "pastoral" address to the *Alge* group seems to be closer to Tzara's 1918 Dada Manifesto – cosmic projections and all – than to André Breton's more resolutely Freudian 1921 surrealist counterpart.

The popular culture of Bogza's times was rich in dramatizations of the internal "struggle," exemplified by Stefan Zweig's oft translated *Der Kampf mit dem Dämon: Hölderlin–Kleist–Nietzsche* (1925) and Emil Ludwig's *Trois Titans: Michel Ange, Rembrandt, Beethoven* (1930).

* Editors' note: *Alge* (Algae) was a youthful and provocative journal of the early 1930s, founded by Aurel Baranga. The members of the eponymous group of contributors to the journal are sometimes referred to as *algiști*. Bogza's "Profesie de credință pentru grupul Alge" celebrates the formation of this group as a new strand in the Romanian avant-garde, distinct from (and more adventurous than) the one associated with the journal *Unu*. Yet it was in *Unu* no. 35 (May 1931) that Bogza's text was published. This is less paradoxical than it may seem, since Sașa Pană himself, the editor of *Unu*, had encouraged the talented young men to go their own way and create their own venue. (See Pană's autobiography, *Născut în '02* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1973), page 289.) Seven or so years older than the *Alge* group members, Bogza remained for them a trusted and inspiring friend.

In terms of poetry, dissimilar though Rilke's *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* (*Letters to a Young Poet*), written between 1903-1908, published in 1929) and F. T. Marinetti's 1909 futurist manifesto may be, Geo Bogza's open letter to the *Alge* group contains echoes of both. Rilke exalts the writer's aloneness and uniqueness, the acceptance of the "dragons" inside him and the pursuit of "meaning" in all choices. Marinetti's brand of transcendentalism begins with the fragile courage of artists under thirty, the need to embrace primal elements instead of the cultural establishments of one's country and of "plunging into the mouth and breast of the world." Bogza's climactic allusions are, similarly, to the "planet," the "Universe," and the "black star" of the poets' destiny.

The "Profession of Faith" may appear to be as grammatically and syntactically "vertiginous," to use Bogza's own description, as his theses. His vocabulary and rhetorical organization, however, are typical of learned Romanian in general and anything but the radical medium his "young wolves" ought to be feeding on. Bogza's uses strings of elegant variation (antiphrasis, litotes, antonomasia) and periphrases: "Ființe" (beings) for people, a poet's "prezență" (presence) for his role in public life, "adolescență" (adolescence) for youth or youthfulness and "apariție" (apparition, appearance) for a debut in print.

Wherever possible Bogza's vocabulary and syntax, awkwardness and all, have been preserved. The original has quite a few typos, it should be noted.

Stavros Deligiorgis

A Profession of Faith for the *Alge* Group

I have never been content with the sluggish rhythms and the flatness of conventional exchanges I had to settle for each time I wished to reach a semblance of understanding between myself and other people. In order that a conversation might have a sense of balance, I have had to renounce, ahead of time, whole sets of thoughts and attitudes that have been the backbone of my true self.¹

My coherency gone, I have embraced mechanisms of perennial duplicity, my every word and every gesture giving rise to falsehood and added compromise. This became even more striking in light of the vertiginous strength of my ideas; the irrepressible horse inside me straining at the bit to gallop even as the pressure to be pedestrian has often forced me to dismount.

An attempt to break the sluggishness would be the equivalent of going against prevailing custom; but with everybody slipping away onto dissimilar planes, in the end one was left with a painful wrenching impression of *non-convergence*.

There is no taking pride in any singularity here. Granted, being respectful of any being exacts from everybody the same admission of the fatality of any falsehood, therefore the same lowering of the tension of thought must be expected in dealing with other people. And it is exactly as when two cars meet at night. Both need to lower their headlights so their drivers will not be blinded. But in friendship I have found this precaution to be useless. I have sought, on the contrary, *catastrophe in friendship* – thinking here of Rimbaud-Verlaine – and I have wished that human beings would approach each other with their psychic potential turned on to the maximum, whatever risk that would entail, the risk being a wonderful sieve through which to discern the authentic temperaments from the imitators, and which would leave upon the silk tissue nothing but the diamonds of pure passion.

And because in the sluggishness of a conventional discussion such discerning cannot take place, I have assumed the same spiritual plane of everybody and have conceived of discussion as an obligatory hollow in which humans descend² in order to be able to meet others, something that cannot happen on the dizzying heights of personal thought to which, when the discussion is over, everyone

¹ The exercise is called "malleability," the ability to adapt to your environment; I label it s. and classify it with the line of the infamous processes that so condition the acceptance of a presentation that it does not exceed mediocrity by much.

² This is not the case of an intellectualist discussion carried on by bookish spirits talking, comfortably and preciously, about any problem at all, using salon acrobatics and climbing to higher and higher ground one repartee after another until a summit of artifice is reached; it is the case of the urge to have discussions in delirium, discussions driven by the winds of fear, of spiritual devastation, the meltdown of beings burned by authentic flames, making the existence of a group the equivalent of a permanent, heartbreaking question mark addressed to the Universe.

returns alone, like taking an elevator back up, carrying along the false images of the others that had been imprinted down below.³

But I rebel against this process, I want its unmaking, I want for us to bring to encounters our most generous selves, and to come together on a level unvitiated by any formula of the codes of good manners. I crack between my fingers like some pathetic celluloid dolls all conventions and subtleties that would denature my core. I'd find the act of self-protection to be the beginning of a mental ankylosis and one unworthy of me, if, at 23 years of age, I were to use a waiting room of the soul, pretend that I was busy inside, when in truth, I would be spying, through curtains, the faces of the new arrivals. The moment any concern arises in me, I simply and naturally admit it without resorting to speculation or putting on an act of sympathy.

Steeped in the dynamics of this unequivocal sincerity, I acknowledge here the keenness spurred by your emergence, last fall, as a group, like an unforeseen crop of adolescence. It was in the vertiginous and ravenous urban setting of the Bercovici printing shop – where his humble person goes around like a memento of eternal striving, and where Weiss the typesetter, transfigured, bent over the job case trestle, sets a poem as if he were smoking opium, with a passion that warms the lead and channels into it a fluid not in the least untrue to that in the poet's page. There I saw you all, coming from the side streets like young wolves and I squeezed, with a glimmer of emotion, the painter Perahim's rosy fingers – and how genius-like, I wonder? – Aurelian Baranga's hand of the rebellious gestures, Gherasim Luca's hand of the extended warmth, not to mention those of the other magical apparitions, like the ever wakeful Sesto Pals'. You were brought in by a surge in the blood that you knew enough to catch on time thus grounding your adolescence, all at once, under the luminous glass bell of the poem. In your hearts, just as in an aquarium, restless fish could be seen surfacing, the sharks of fear, every additional new poem, tumultuous like a photograph of marine depths, demanding my most attentive pouring over – a most favorite activity.

To have my favorite author counted among the most established would be too easy a thrill, and one I shun; I leave that to the readership of the big publishers. I think it is just spineless (one of a long line of character weaknesses) to lack the courage to admire a new poet upon his first appearance in print and to circle, cowardly, until other people's confirmation comes in, and so, until, years later, reading him can be the mark of sophistication. And it is one of the greatest untruths that the time the poet invests between his debut and his canonization perfects his talent. On the contrary, with time his talent dulls and sags, until,

³ Following the end of any gathering it is typical for everybody to leave convinced of his own genius and of everybody else's nullity.

reduced to the lowest common denominator, he becomes accepted.⁴ Not a single future accomplishment of yours will be able to carry as much emergent weight as the publication of your first poem which means your first clash with your family and with yourself, your first renouncing a series of privileges you would have otherwise enjoyed, the first sacrifice out of many to come and, because of these, the looks that you will be getting, looks that are sometimes well able to turn raised eyebrows arching in the flesh into symbols of arcades cut in stone.

I foresee the skies above you to be torn in shreds by the colors of tragedy, a scream is locked in your voice, and you pass by it as you would by a snake's lair without realizing it. One day, you will enter a "no return" canal in which you will be propelled constantly forward, your physical being to be ground up as you pour over your pages. In secret test tubes I have grown cultures of your poems and I have analyzed them. In every one of them there is evidence of the stigma of a bacillus that is never disproven. Your adolescence translates into obsessing gestures like the miming of actors in horror plays and, upon my rather metallic eye, you inscribe some of the most hallucinating chapters.⁵

And how troubled is my voice by the utterance of your names, names totally pure and free of sellout or compromise, more precious than those of any of our existing writers. I know already who is Camil or Cezar Petrescu⁶, I am aware of their place in our literature, and know also that they could write *yet another* book – a most valuable contribution to . . . etc., etc. – which is precisely why they are left out of the range of my attention and so I can direct it totally towards you.

Your name belongs entirely to you, no critic or literary journal has burdened it with any kind of hope, and so you enjoy a mobility of action that no one around here has any more, and out of which alone the surprise achievement will come, with all the virtues of temerity. It is fatally true that the moment a grave literary authority formulates a prognostication concerning a newcomer, perspiration shoots up his spine. There is fear of overstepping boundaries, of coming short of expectations, a virgin's coyness will accompany his actions. And out of this reticence will never come that unleashing of torrents capable of conduiting, from one's being to the page, a viable image of things brewing inwardly. There are young people who, having situated themselves inside the circle of personalities

⁴ During the last few years a normalized Arghezi is admired too. Mr. Aderca dedicates to the stale Cocteau of *Opium* a rapturous review in the *Adevărul*. He himself is beginning to be admired as "daring" and yet, how steep was the descending graph of his own daring from his *Decomposed Man* and *The Woman of the White Flesh* onwards. There are also people who consider Mr. Minulescu an avant-garde writer.

⁵ I love you.

⁶ or the one who infamously exploited adolescence by encasing it inside jars of sweet preserves and, lately and unexpectedly, by talking on the radio, fouled up my speaker: Ionel Teodoreanu. For this he shall be punished when I grow up and box with him and write a book about adolescence myself.

endowed with the character of lodestars and having internalized their opinions, have annihilated all their resources and poisoned all the buds that were about to bloom in them, their future activity already bearing the stamp of uselessness.

Only those who will resist the temptation of the cadres of instant valorizing and will not rush to sell the howling pack of their insides for a ribboned medal at the end of the year, will safeguard under their eyebrows and inside their writing pens the tension that will keep them in a permanent clash with themselves and will prevent them from lamentably failing. This is why your name must be permanently at war with any attempt to be terrorized, with the impression of a crystal glass you would be required to bear on the top of your head. I know of no fly trap more full of glue aimed at subduing the destiny of young poets than their own name. For starters, when first publication takes place in a climate of indifference equaling anonymity, daring is a natural function requiring neither effort nor supporting credo. But, given frequent mentions, its potency decreases, the author becomes *a prisoner of his own name*, and all for a reputation that, having sacrificed all instinct of revolt, self-destructs and accepts to join the herd. I do not expect the thirty-five year old writer to be as raucous as a twenty year old, but I do expect him *not to settle*, not to be domesticated in the face of the troubling problems existence presupposes. I would wish, for us too, an example of mischievous maturity of the caliber of Giovanni Papini's.

For our agitated spirit, the vapid literature produced in Romania is but an outrage and an insult. The sky within us is too ravaged and too grim to settle for the kind of works whose merits simply add to existing values. On the contrary, the latter efface them through and through. We resolutely carry a desire for something else, a presence that is not a contribution, but an overturning.⁷

Our existence is torn apart by worries and visions which we do not find represented in any of the poems, novels, or studies proffered as exemplars. Nor do we renounce the right to affirm them in the same manner in which we consume them.

We write not because we want to become writers but because we are condemned to write, as we might be condemned to madness, or to suicide.

We submit that the image on our retina is real – real because it burns – and we demand a revision of consciousness with respect to us. We are in possession of thunderbolt questions that would shake the certainties of those senile mentors who are spouting generous solutions for a youth whose veins they palpate with a finger about as sensitive as a hoof. The saving course they recommend notwithstanding, a different tragedy gushes within us that cannot be stopped by

⁷ Could anyone speak of Eminescu's oeuvre as a "contribution" to the lyric poetry that came before him? And to what extent were the works of Rimbaud, Poe and of all the others of the same lineage contributions? A sign ought to be put up alerting writers to "Beware of bringing contributions."

any of the solutions of reconciliation between us and the world, which, no matter how idealistic or metaphysical they are claimed to be, are nothing more than the fundamental excreting of the practical kind.⁸

There are some of us, however, for whom the accident of being-poets in this existence is not just another business. Our revolt, our bewilderment at the Universe and at ourselves, we will not exchange for the currency of any system wishing to integrate us.

We have not yet fully awakened from the disaster of our coming into life, and living in dread of the disaster of the end, we have no time to join any of the organizations of our planet,⁹ we only have time to put question marks to the universe, to send shrieks into eternity,¹⁰ pale, disoriented, like the condemned on the steps of the scaffold.¹¹

Translated from the Romanian by
Stavros Deligiorgis and Monique Yaari

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⁸ In this sense I do not know of any species lower than that of philosophy professors and the theorists of collective ideals. Philosophy professors are parts of a system that confines them to immobility, to the inability to be stirred or troubled to destruction by any concern about the world. Philosophy professors need, first of all, a reputation: they have daughters to be married off and superiors whom they must be on good terms with. And from this unctuous banquet of life their thought will not emerge except with the finality of the satisfaction of excrement.

⁹ We are excruciatingly integrated within our own bone system; we are prisoners of our atmosphere and of the solar system. Why should we subordinate these biological temblors to some petty, contrived organizations?

¹⁰ Ion Călugăru: "shrieks into eternity."

¹¹ The above isn't literature but a veridical tribute we pay the ongoing disaster within ourselves. And the phrases above will be authenticated before a tribunal of tragedy on the day when the drama to which we are predestined is fulfilled, because a meeting with and a departure, arm in arm, with our black star is inevitable.